Moving towards power?
Mobilities and the Political Mobilization of Motorcyclists in Uganda Kenya and Eastern DRC

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1. Introduction

> *[Motorcycle taxi drivers] have a vast network in the country. […] There is no village where they are not established. […] They are all manned by young energetic people who relate effectively and actively horizontally in their communities. […] They are the ones who transport them, they interact with them. So that inherently makes them very influential* ((210318KKB), Former Minister of Interior and presidential candidate Kizza Besigye, Kampala).

Motorcycle taxis are omnipresent in the lives of East Africans. In every city and village, they provide the population, with much needed and relatively cheap transport services. On the move, the drivers use their speed as well as daring manoeuvres and angry yells to squeeze through jams or along unpaved village roads. At the same time, the sturdiness of the motorbike allows them to carry heavy loads, of up to four persons or even a small cow. While many fear their rough and sometimes violent behaviour, motorcycle taxi riding also provides the livelihoods of millions of people in eastern Africa.

With such a public presence, it is not surprising that a large number of scientific publications have been written about these "*hybrid mobile subjects*" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 714). Amongst the topics they address are accidents (Siya et al., 2019), medical conditions (Wasike et al., 2017), economic developments (Venter et al., 2014), digitalization (Martin et al., 2023) and social environments (Oldenburg, 2020). Somewhat surprisingly two important and interlinked aspects have received little attention so far: their mobility and their role in politics.

Although motorcycle taxi drivers are widely described as a highly mobile group (e.g. Ibrahim & Bize, 2018; Nyanzi et al., 2004; Öbom, 2020), very few publications such as Evans et al. (2018) engage more closely with the nature of their mobility. Likewise, their political participation e.g. as campaign activists (e.g. Muwanga et al., 2023; Titeca, 2014; van Acker et al., 2021) or protesters (Ayimpam et al., 2022, p. 144; Goodfellow & Titeca, 2012) is repeatedly mentioned but not reviewed closely.

One reason for the lack of engagement with the political role of motorcycle taxi drivers is likely to be the general difficulty of conducting political research in the area. Especially in

Uganda, fieldwork on political topics is considered dangerous and researchers, both local and foreign, face state repression when conducting political research (c.f. Cohen & McIntyre, 2020). In the light of the intricate entanglement of mobility and power (Jensen, 2011), this gap in the literature regarding these important aspects of the motorcycle taxi sector provided the impetus for this dissertation.

Although in general there is a rich conceptual literature on the relationship of mobility and power (Bærenholdt, 2013; Cresswell, 2010; Jensen, 2014), there is a notable gap in addressing the role of mobility in the reproduction of political power through election campaigns - similar to the gap in the literature on motorcycle taxis. While the vast majority of countries allow diverse political parties (Janda & Kwak, 2015, p. 123) and hold more or less competitive elections, the role of mobility for processes of political mobilization is little researched. While the links between mobility and different forms of power production are addressed frequently (Bærenholdt, 2008; Cass & Manderscheid, 2010; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), elections are mostly absent within this literature. Likewise, literature on political mobilization hardly addresses the role of mobility for activists within these campaigns.

Over the last five years, this dissertation project worked towards closing these gaps within mobility studies and the studies of political activism by conducting extensive research on the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern Africa. Thereby it sought to answer the main question: How are processes of political mobilization in Uganda, Kenya and Eastern Congo linked to mobility?

In what follows, this framing paper will outline the methodological and empirical contribution of this dissertation project. It starts by stating it's theoretical and methodological approaches, the results of the research as well as the publications that arose from the project. Bringing literature and findings together, it will then discuss the implications for the theoretical literature on mobility and political mobilization.

2. Motorcycle taxi drivers – Quick fix and power brokers

While motorcycle taxi services are less common in most countries of the global north, they are widespread in eastern and central Africa (Ehebrecht et al., 2018). Services, as well as the riders often have country-specific names. In Uganda and Kenya riders and their transport

service are called “Boda-Boda” while in eastern DRC the riders are called “Motards” and their service “Taxi Moto”. In all three countries, they serve as short-distance transport providers who can master even the most challenging road conditions. They are as common in the countryside, where they connect remote villages inaccessible by car, as they are in the metropolises of the region where they allow customers to bypass the menacing traffic jams (Howe & Davis, 2002, p. 236). Despite using light motorcycles, motorcycle taxis often carry up to four passengers and heavy loads. This flexibility, paired with the affordability of both their services and the motorcycle itself, has made them highly successful. From their origins as bicycle taxis at the Uganda-Kenyan border in the 1960s and 1970s, and their subsequent motorization in the 90s and 2000s, motorcycle taxis have spread to every corner of the Great Lakes region. Today they number more than 2 million in Uganda where motorcycle taxi driving has become the second most important profession after agriculture (Amone, 2021, p. 1). Estimates based on interviews and local government data suggest that between three and ten percent of the population in the research areas are currently working as motorcycle taxi drivers (see: Figure 1).

City	Population	Motorcycle Taxis (estimate)	Motorcycle Taxis (official data)	Motorcycle Taxis (per capita)
Kampala City	1.500.000	75.000		0,05
Greater Kampala	2.500.000	250.000		0,1
Mbarara	200.000	20.000	17.000 (2014)	0,1
Lira	100.000	3.500		0,035
Soroti	50.000		2.000 (2018)	0,04
Cumulative	2.850.000	273.000		0,095
Goma /Bukavu (Congo)	1.000.000	30.000		0,03
Nairobi (Kenya)	4.800.000	200.000		0,041

Figure 1: Numbers of Motorcyclists in selected cities. Source: Own work.

The steady growth of the sector also entailed its professionalization. At their operational bases at street corners, called “stage”, “shimo” (literary: pit) or “base”, riders usually elect a leadership committee and often establish welfare or savings and loan schemes (Ibrahim & Bize, 2018). Superordinate associations, unions or cooperatives further unite riders in certain areas to protect their economic and political interests and provide further professional and social services (Goodfellow & Mukwaya, 2021, p. 28ff).

Although motorcycle taxi drivers started to appear at political rallies in the early 2000s (Daily Monitor, 2018), and political leaders such as Yoweri Museveni (Daily Monitor, 2022) and Felix Tshesikedi (c.f. Trapido, 2021, p. 214) are described as closely associated with the motorcycle taxi sector, their political role has received little attention. While some publications mention their role as political activists (c.f. Nyairo, 2023; Titeca, 2014), little is known about the scale, patterns and effects of their political mobilization and the mobility that propels it.

However, in the context of Thailand, Claudio Sopranzetti (2014) had already described them as effective political facilitators. He also undertook a first attempt to theorize the political mobilization of the group. Identifying mobility as the most important asset of motorcycle taxi drivers, he links it to their political role in what he describes as the mobility-mobilization nexus. In contrast, literature on the motorcycle taxi sector in eastern Africa had so far taken their mobility for granted and not considered it a precondition of their political engagement.

3. Linking mobility and political mobilization

Mobility is an essential element of the term political mobilization which Charles Tilly describes as "ways in which groups acquire resources and making them available for collective action" (Tilly, 1978, 1.11). Despite that, little has been written about the importance of mobility for political activists and processes of political mobilization. One reason for this might be that much of the conceptual literature on political mobilization (e.g. Brady et al., 1999; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1992; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993) was published before the appearance of the mobility paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), which highlighted the relational and thus also the political dimension of mobility. Only later on mobility was re-examined as extending beyond transportation and incorporating physical movements but also mobile practices and discourses on mobility (Cresswell, 2010, p. 19; Manderscheid, 2014, p. 189). Scholars now emphasized the close relationship between mobility and power (Bærenholdt, 2013; Cass & Manderscheid, 2010; Jensen, 2014; Sheller, 2016) and found that "*mobility provides a space for political relations*" (Adey, 2017, p. 106). Furthermore, mobility has been described as "*one of the major resources of 21st-century life*" (Cresswell, 2010, p. 22) and a valuable social capital (Kaufmann et al., 2004, p. 751). This in turn allows it to be examined as a component of political mobilization. The mobility paradigm therefore enables the analysis of political activists based on their mobility resources. However, most

publications have so far focussed on the production of power through the conduct of daily mobile practices like walking (Adey, 2017, p. 198ff), driving (Manderscheid, 2014; Merriman, 2005) commuting (Richardson & Jensen, 2008) and many more (c.f. Cresswell, 2006). In comparison, few have so far used these new approaches to mobility to analyse how mobility affects political power distribution through political mobilization (Kohler & Manderscheid, 2024), while elections have received even less attention.

This lack of attention extends to political activism i.e. the participation in election campaigns, protests, parties or voting (Norris, 2009). Although studies have looked beyond demographics and have acknowledged the importance of resources like time, money and knowledge (Verba et al., 1993, p. 456), mobility has rarely been identified as a valuable resource for activists (c.f. Sopranzetti, 2014).

Recent publications follow a general tendency to focus on digital canvassing (c.f. Mutsvairo, 2016) and the more researched global north (Gershtenson, 2003; Larrosa-Fuentes, 2024; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Political mobilization in the global south, in Africa in particular, has been the subject of limited research interest as "*studies of political mobilisation in sub-Saharan Africa have focussed primarily on the messages that parties impart to voters*" (Paget, 2019a, p. 2). The continuation of this top-down approach in the analysis of ground campaigns in Africa (Paget, 2022), is rooted in the common perception that political parties, and campaign activists, are weak and mostly inactive in between campaigns where they are briefly activated and instrumentalized by influential actors to pursue specific objectives (Lockwood et al., 2022, p. 204). If activists are studied at all they are mostly categorized based on ethnic or religious affiliations which are seen as crucial social divisions in Sub-Saharan Africa (Jöst et al., 2024, p. 1443).

Current literature acknowledges a growing demand for mobility within election campaigns in Africa which is expressed through the use of helicopters (Paget, 2020, p. 23), mobile phone technology (Manacorda & Tesei, 2018) and motorcyclists (Ezeibe et al., 2017, p. 262). Thereby "*significant sums are spent on hiring, decorating and fuelling vehicles*" (Paget, 2019a, p. 16). In Kenya for example "*over 80% of* [party primary] *candidates* […] *revealed that they spent the most on publicity and transport costs*" (Kanyinga & Mboya, 2021, p. 37). These findings strongly hint at a so far unexamined role of mobility for processes of political mobilization in Sub-Sahara Africa and thus provide the basis for this study.

4. Research question

To address the gaps outlined above this dissertation conducted empirical research in Uganda, Kenya and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The case studies aimed to collect data that made it possible to answer the research question and its four sub-questions:

How are processes of political mobilization in Uganda, Kenya and Eastern Congo linked to mobility?

I. How does the mobility capital influence the mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers as campaign activists, and how are they mobilized?

II. Which techniques of mobilization are executed by motorcycle taxi drivers and what mobile elements do they contain?

III. How does mobility-driven political mobilization affect the conduct of election campaigns?

IV. How does the mobility-mobilization nexus affect the mobility of the activists and which additional political, economic and social effects can be identified?

The first sub-question aims to analyse the motorcycle-based activists and their mobilizable potentials. Describing the resources of political activists presents a relatively novel approach for the examined African settings, where they have widely been neglected (c.f. Bob-Milliar, 2012, p. 670). By focussing on their mobility, the question lays the foundation for the identification of the use of mobile capabilities within campaign strategies.

Sub-question II. looks at political campaign activities that motorcycle taxi drivers take part in. It then aims at identifying the mobile elements within them. Beyond that, it links to the first sub-question by pointing out how activists use their mobile potentials to conduct these activities.

The third sub-question seeks to identify the effects of mobility-powered mobilization on the conduct of the campaigns. It reflects changes in campaign practices and mobilization that result from the participation of mobile activists, and the effects of these changes on the process of power production through elections.

Finally, sub-question IV is aimed at incorporating insights from the data beyond the theoretical approach and the conduct of election campaigns. These were originally expected to be effects on the mobilized activist groups themselves as well as mobility and transport patterns. However, during the data collection, it became evident that several additional effects could be identified.

5. Research design: methods, fieldwork and data

The dissertation applied a mobile multisited ethnography approach (c.f. Jiron, 2011, p. 41; Marcus, 1995) and built on an explorative and non-comparative (Hannerz, 2003, p. 206) structure that seeks to explore the diverse ways in which mobility and political mobilization are linked within and across different socio-political contexts (Falzon, 2016, p. 1). The data collection relied on qualitative methods including mobile participant observation (c.f. Jiron, 2011), ride-alongs (Wegerif, 2019) and semi-structured interviews (Longhurst, 2016) within three case studies.

Uganda, Kenya and the eastern DR Congo were selected as instrumental case studies (c.f. O'Reiley, 2009, p. 25). The use of multiple case studies aimed at understanding the processes of mobility-driven campaign mobilization beyond the particularities of a single setting. Thereby it focussed on the trans-local and mobility-powered mobilization networks rather than on localized phenomena (Coleman & Hellermann, 2012, p. 7). Following a non-comparative approach, each site nevertheless provided specific political, economic and social conditions in which the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi riders could be studied (c.f. Marcus, 1995, p. 99). The mixed-method approach to data collection (c.f. Scott, 2020, p. 323) ensured a broad set of data that enabled the contextualization of the findings beyond these cases. This then provided the basis for the abstraction of reoccurring findings and at the same time reduced the risk of overgeneralization of individual sites (Falzon, 2016, p. 5). The research design thereby aligned with the goal of the dissertation project to provide new insights into the linkages of mobility and political mobilization. To this, each case study contributed a different background of competitive elections, varying levels of democracy, as well as a differently nuanced motorcycle taxi sector (Owino et al., 2024). In addition, Uganda and Kenya provided the opportunity to collect data during election campaigns.

Uganda constituted the single largest case study. While motorcycle taxis dominate Uganda's roads (Goodfellow & Mukwaya, 2021, p. 28), Uganda has also become a hub for new developments in the sector (c.f. Martin et al., 2023). Furthermore, the country's motorcycle taxis frequently participate in election campaigns and political protests (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 52). The embrace of the sector by key politicians (Goodfellow, 2015; Raynor, 2014) has resulted in a high number of mobilizations and a diverse deployment of motorcycle taxi drivers. The country has also experienced more than two decades of uninterrupted and highly competitive, although not free and fair, elections (Abrahamsen & Bareebe, 2016; Cheeseman et al., 2020). These factors, and the opportunity to observe mobilization during election campaigns (2020/2021), albeit under the threat of state interference (c.f. Cohen & McIntyre, 2020), made Uganda an important case study. The long-established and close relationship between motorcyclists and the political class thereby also provided suitable conditions for identifying the effects of the mobility-mobilization nexus on the transport sector and the political realm (c.f. Goodfellow, 2015; Müller, 2023).

As East Africa's economic powerhouse (Cheeseman et al., 2020, p. 58) that has conducted competitive multiparty elections since 1991 (Waddilove, 2019, p. 336), Kenya added another valuable setting to the project. The country also contains a large motorcycle taxi sector (Ehebrecht et al., 2018, p. 245) that has been politically active in the past (Nyairo, 2023, p. 119). High campaign monetarization (Cheeseman et al., 2020, p. 103; Kayinda & Muguzi, 2019; Rasmussen & van Stapele, 2020) and unrestricted but often violent campaigns (Animashaun, 2020, p. 19) created different conditions for the mobilization of motorcyclists. This enabled the identification of additional campaign practices and relations between the motorcyclists and political actors. As in Uganda, Kenya's general elections in 2022 offered an opportunity to observe these processes directly. There the low levels of state reprisals made it a suitable site for the observation of campaign activities that were deemed too dangerous to observe in Uganda (c.f. Garbe, 2023).

In eastern Congo, the third case study, armed conflict limited the scope of the data collection. Nevertheless, its inclusion crucially contributed towards answering the research question by providing a political historical setting that had seen only two rounds of consecutive competitive elections (Kumar, 2016, p. 178). While the motorcycle taxi sector was also well established and a major contributor to political protest in the area (Oldenburg,

2018, p. 264), the relationship between the riders and the political class was less solidified. This made the site important for describing the earlier stages of the mobility-mobilization nexus, which Uganda and Kenya had gone through in the 2000s. It also allowed for the examination of the mobility capital and mobilization potentials of motorcycle taxi riders, as yet less influenced by the effects of an established integration of motorcyclists into political campaigns (c.f. Müller, 2024c). Furthermore, the dense concentration of motorcycle associations offered increased opportunities to study recruitment processes as well as the impacts of political participation on motorcyclist associations compared to the other two case studies (c.f. Müller, 2024a).

Each case study featured multiple data collection sites (c.f. Marcus, 1995, p. 97). Urban, peri-urban and rural settings were included to capture a broader range of campaign activities which could vary depending on the required mobilities (Bob-Milliar, 2019, p. 483; Boone & Wahman, 2015, p. 345) and the competing parties and candidates (c.f. Wahman & Goldring, 2020, 95f). Furthermore, the rural-urban mobility of both riders and politicians (Nyanzi et al., 2004, p. 240; Wilkins, 2016, p. 622) made the inclusion of multiple sites necessary to trace mobilization and patronage networks. In total, the data collection spanned over four longer research periods in Uganda (2018, 2020/2021), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2021) and Kenya (2022) and two shorter stays in Congo (2020) and Uganda (2022). In Uganda, data was collected in two rural districts (Bunyangabu, Busia), three peri-urban settings (Soroti, Lira, Ibanda) and three cities (Mbarara, Gulu, Kampala) (c.f.: Figure 2).

Figure 2: Research sites in Uganda. Cartography: Elbie Bently

In Kenya, research was conducted in the cities of Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu, the town of Malindi, the peri-urban Kiambu County and the rural hinterlands of Kilifi County (c.f. figure 3).

Figure 3: Research sites in Kenya: Cartography: Elbie Bently.

The eastern DRC was the only setting where data collection was confined to urban areas due to security concerns. Here the case study featured the provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu (c.f. figure 4).

Figure 4: Research sites in the DRC. Cartography: Elbie Bently.

Within the research design, the selection of methods likewise considered the movements and fluidity of motorcyclists, campaign practices and mobilization networks (Büscher & Urry, 2009). It used mobile participant observations (c.f. Jiron, 2011) and ride-alongs (Wegerif, 2019) as well as multi-sited semi-structured interviews (c.f. Büscher & Urry, 2009, p. 105; Müller, 2025a).

To "*follow the people*" (Marcus, 1995, p. 106) and capture the culmination points of motorcyclist mobilization (Paget, 2019a, p. 2), mobile participant observations were centred on the general election campaigns in Uganda and Kenya despite not being limited to them. During campaigns, the researcher followed politicians of multiple parties in different constituencies. This enabled the observation of campaign practices, as well as the otherwise hard-to-gasp interactions between politicians and motorcycle taxi riders. Because politicians would hold several activities a day at different locations, the observations required almost constant movement. Furthermore, some campaign activities, such as rallies and motorcades were mobile themselves (c.f. Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023; Paget, 2023). To allow for mobile

observations, most transport was done by motorcycle taxi. This enabled quick movements that blended with the presence of motorcyclists at the events. It also helped to reduce the attention of the police, which in Uganda constantly threatened opposition campaigns (Khisa, 2019). Overall, the observations made it possible to identify and describe campaign practices that included motorcycle taxi drivers but also the mobile elements within them. Whenever possible, they would be documented with photos, videos and field notes (c.f. Flowerdew & Martin, 2005, p. 181).

Ride-alongs were added to the research methods to grasp the spatialities of moving motorcycle taxis (c.f. Axtell et al., 2008, p. 903; Gillen, 2016). Reproducing the spatial setup in which motorcycle taxi drivers and their customers engaged in political talks thereby enabled a deeper understanding of this widely practiced form of campaigning. In addition, the ride-alongs were essential for the understanding of the mobile life worlds of the motorcycle taxi drivers (Wegerif, 2019, p. 125), which are usually researched from fixed locations such as their stages (e.g. Doherty, 2022; Ibrahim & Bize, 2018). The necessity to conduct ride-alongs also derived from the inaccessibility of the moving motorcycle that could not be properly observed nor fully described within interviews (Falzon, 2016, p. 9). Documentation of this method however remained challenging due to the lack of space, the speed and the noise during the rides (Müller, 2025a). It was therefore mostly done ex-post in the form of field notes (c.f. Scott, 2020, p. 320).

While the use of mobile methods made it possible to capture many interactions and campaign practices, multi-sited and semi-structured interviews allowed for the inclusion of broader perceptions and experiences in relation to the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers (c.f. Longhurst, 2016, p. 112). They also made it possible to identify violent, prohibited or rare practices that could not be observed. Of a total of 265 interviews, 150 were conducted in Uganda, 55 in Congo and 60 in Kenya. While in Congo all 55 interviews took place in an urban environment, in Uganda 44 interviews were conducted in rural settings, 51 in peri-urban settings and 55 in cities. In Kenya 34 interviews were conducted in cities, 14 in peri-urban areas and 12 in rural settings. While more interviews were done in urban environments, interviewees repeatedly described campaign activities beyond the setting they were interviewed in. This was especially true for politicians who resided in the cities despite having campaigned in rural constituencies. In Congo likewise, several

interviewees, both motorcyclists and politicians, had campaigned in the rural hinterlands but otherwise preferred the safer living and working conditions in the cities. The multi-sitedness of the interviews thus helped to grasp networks that spanned beyond an individual location. The two main target groups (c.f. Valentine, 2013, 112ff) in all settings were mobilizing political actors and motorcycle-based campaign activists with potentially knowledgeable observers as a tertiary group. Political actors were comprised of campaigning politicians and campaign organizers. Motorcycle taxi riders, and association representatives who served as intermediaries between politicians and the riders, made up the second target group (c.f. Mukwaya et al., 2022, p. 71). The third group featured a broader set of transport sector officials, urban planners, journalists, social activists, voters and customers of motorcycle taxis.

In many, but not all, sites, research assistants aided the researcher with the scheduling of interviews, translation and transportation in the field (c.f. Kaiser-Grolimund et al., 2016, p. 132). Their deployment resulted in improved access to both politicians and motorcycle taxi riders as well as the ability to conduct interviews in other languages than English, Swahili and German. Most commonly, interviews were translated from French and Luganda. Other languages included Luo, Ateso, Lusamia, Rutooro and Mijikenda. Although a number of interviewees spoke, English or Swahili, they preferred to hold the interview in a more familiar language. Thus, the translations helped interviewees to articulate some more complex views (Smith, 2016, p. 164). The research assistants would be site-specific and recruited based on their social networks in the target area. To limit possible selection biases, each research assistant was given a predefined list of desired interview partners. These included the parliamentary candidates of different parties, local council/county assembly members and candidates, as well as motorcycle taxi association leaders and riders from different parts of the research site. On top of this, the research assistants would suggest further potentially relevant persons. Additional interview opportunities arose from snowballing (c.f. Valentine, 2013, p. 117), especially amongst more high-ranking politicians in Kampala, Nairobi and Bukavu. Despite the prior definition of interviewees, a number of interviews were also the result of spontaneous encounters and on-site recruiting (Longhurst, 2016, p. 109).

The interview questions were defined separately for the two main target groups and were structured around the research questions (c.f. Appendix 1). For political actors, they were centred around questions about their experience with motorcyclist mobilization as well as their relationship towards the motorcycle taxi sector. These were framed by questions about the general conduct of campaigns, the political dynamics in the constituency and their political careers. For campaign organizers, similar guidelines emphasized the conduct of campaigns and the specific processes of mobilization. On the side of the motorcycle taxi drivers, the questions addressed their personal engagement in election campaigns and their perception of politics as well as their individual professional histories and the professional organizations in the respective area. The professional organization of the sector also stood at the centre of interviews with association leaders. Because association leaders constituted the link towards campaign organizers, their interaction and relationship with political actors marked another key topic of interviews (Müller, 2024c, 370). For interviewees who did not belong to one of the main target groups, the questions were more diverse. A common feature among them was questions regarding the perceived role of motorcyclists in election campaigns as well as the transport sector.

The recorded interviews were transcribed by using verbatim transcription whenever they were conducted without an interpreter and then coded with the help of MAXQDA software. The coding process structured the interview data around five main categories (c.f. O'Reiley, 2009, p. 35): Political mobilization, politics, motorcycle taxi drivers, motorcycle taxi associations as well as perceptions and opinions. Several sub-categories further divided each category (c.f. Appendix 2: Code variables). These slightly differed within the three case studies. For example, the more important role of motorcycle associations in Congo and Uganda resulted in more interviews with association officials and a generally stronger emphasis on their structures and role in political mobilizations. This then required more specific codes for these settings, compared to Kenya.

The research design, with its selection of case studies and methods, defined the scope and boundaries of this dissertation. While the use of multi-sited ethnography allowed for the inclusion of three case studies and numerous sites it limited the time available to conduct research in each of them (Hannerz, 2003, p. 211). This led to some desired interview partners in a particular area not being available at the time of the research. Furthermore, it

severely limited the time for observations within each setting, especially within election campaigns. Likewise, the general scheduling of elections limited many of the observations to the two campaign periods. In some cases, observations and their documentation were also limited by security concerns.

In addition to some site-specific differences in the availability of interview partners, e.g. the absence of politicians in the countryside, the willingness to engage in interviews differed between sites and interview groups. Scepticism against external researchers hampered access to ruling party politicians in Uganda and high payment expectations limited access to Congolese state officials (c.f. Gentile, 2013). The use of semi-structured interviews with many open questions also resulted in interviews of many different lengths. Thereby, interviews without interpreters tended to be longer and contained more information due to the more direct conversation. Politicians also tended to answer questions in greater detail than many motorcycle riders. Due to safety concerns, some interviewees chose to stay completely anonymous (c.f. Kang & Hwang, 2023). Generally, publications from this dissertation only include names of interviewees, who actively suggested their use. These were almost exclusively journalists and high-ranking politicians. Security considerations also limited the use of photos and videos during some observations in Uganda.

In total, the multi-sited ethnography approach allowed for some generalization of the empirical findings (c.f. Marcus, 1995, p. 109; O'Reiley, 2009, p. 148). The data supports an empirically grounded discussion about the general interplay of mobility and political mobilization through election campaigns. Furthermore, the findings provide broader insights on the political involvement of motorcyclist in Africa, especially when contrasted against context specific literature (c.f. Brierley & Kramon, 2020; Paget, 2019b).

6. Publications

The dissertation project has so far resulted in five articles and two book chapter contributions. Of these, two are already published, one is accepted, while three more are under review and one paper is currently waiting to be revised and resubmitted.

The publications link the theoretical literature with the empirical data of this dissertation. Following the multi-sited approach, each publication prioritized a particular aspect of the overall research question. Most publications used data from several sites within one of the

research settings. Doing so allowed for an in-depth discussion of the trans-local phenomena within one case study without forcing direct comparisons. The set of publications thereby became complimentary in highlighting aspects of the multi-faceted relationship between mobility and political mobilization.

Methodologically, the broad use of interviews and observations made the data generated by these methods central to most of the publications. The more specific use of ride-alongs led to two publications that discussed in detail the conduct and the findings generated with this. Of these, one focussed on ride-alongs and their embeddedness into the general research methodology.

I. Müller & Doevenspeck 2023 - The fast and the victorious: Mobility, motorcyclists and political mobilization in Uganda. In: Area. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12872

The first publication addresses campaign strategies that make use of motorcycle taxi drivers in Uganda. Through them, it also identifies the inherent mobilities of the motorcyclists that allow them to participate in the election campaigns. The article focuses on the sub-questions II. and III. by describing the role of motorcyclists during campaigns, but also provides insights towards answering sub-question I. This laid the foundation for the subsequent publications that could build on it to describe the preconditions and effects of their mobilization.

II. Müller 2024 - (Un)leashed potentials: an activist-centred perspective on the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern DRC. In: Journal of Eastern African Studies. https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2024.2375078

The second article addressed the underlying mobile and social capitals of motorcycle-powered activists and discussed how recruitment processes and election strategies define their mobilization. It used data from the DRC, where the mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers was less established, to illustrate which potentials were mobilized easily and which remain untapped. Thus the publication addressed sub-question I. and highlighted the potential of mobility capital for campaign mobilization.

III. Müller (2023) - Boda-Boda Pakalast: Mobility and the Politics of Informal Public Transport in Uganda. Submitted to: Applied Mobilities (Under review since March 2024)

This article will look into the relationship between the Ugandan state and the informally operating motorcycle taxi sector. It argues that riders use a variety of mobility-powered strategies to outmanoeuvre the state and defend their privileged position amongst transporters in the country. Thereby political embeddedness is amongst the crucial strategies that allow them to thrive economically. The article contributes mainly towards answering sub-question IV. but also provides some insights towards sub-question I.

IV. Müller (2024) - Freedom of Speech on the Move: How Motorcycle Taxis open up small mobile Spaces for political Talk in Uganda. Submitted to: Mobilities (Under review since June 2024)

This proposed article crucially builds on the experiences of ride-alongs on motorcycle taxis. It addresses the spatalities of moving motorcycle taxis, by using a Harveyan approach to space to theorize them as small mobile spaces. It then describes how these spaces enable free political speech in the increasingly restrictive political setting of Uganda. In doing so, it contributes towards understanding the mobility capital of motorcycle taxi riders and thus sub-question I. Additionally, it addresses an important effect of the mobility-mobilization nexus (sub-question IV.) and links it to spatial theory.

V. Müller (2025) - Kleine Mobile Räume qualitativ erfassen: Ride-Alongs und mobile teilnehmende Beobachtungen bei Motorradtaxifahrten
[Grasping small mobile spaces qualitatively: Ride-alongs and mobile participant observations of motorcycle taxi rides] In: Handbuch Mobile Methoden [Handbook Mobile Methods] Eds. Strüver A., Naumann M. (Accepted, expected date of publication 2025)

This book chapter reflects the methodological approach of the dissertation project, especially the use of mobile methods. It contemplates the advantages and challenges of using ride-alongs and mobile participant observation to experience and subsequently describes the social dimensions of motorcycle taxi rides. It argues that small mobile spaces are analysed best by using a combined approach of ride-alongs, mobile participant observation and stationary interviews. While the publication does not address the research questions directly, it contributes towards the overall goal of broadening the existing knowledge on the linkages of mobility and political mobilization but discussing methodologies that enable research within this context.

VI. Müller (2025) - Swiss army knives on wheels: Motorcycle taxi drivers as mobile campaign activists. In: The New Ground Wars: Changing Ground Campaigns in Africa. Eds. Lockwood S., Krönke M., Paget D. (Under review, expected date of publication 2025)

The second book chapter provides an overview of the empirical findings from all three case studies. It argues that motorcycle taxi drivers have become prolific activists due to their mobile and social potentials. In turn, their mobilization has affected the political, economic and social systems of the countries they are mobilized in. Thus, the chapter links and contextualizes the findings of the distinct case studies and provides the basis for a general understanding of the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers in Africa. While it combines all sub-questions, it does so on an empirical level without venturing too deep into further theoretical implications.

VII. Müller (2024) - Better together? The role of professional associations in establishing motorcycle taxi riding as a socially accepted occupation in eastern DRC. In: International Development and Planning Review (To be resubmitted).

The final publication so far, focuses on motorcycle taxi associations in eastern DRC. While they are conductors for political mobilization they also aim to integrate the sector into society by rallying social acceptance for their profession. The article discusses the strategies and success of these attempts which not only use their mobile capital (sub-question I.) but are also shaped by the effects of their political mobilization (sub-question IV.).

7. Empirical findings

Mobilizing political activists during elections is a complex and multi-faceted process. It begins with the process of motivating potential activist groups (Abramson & Claggett, 2001, p. 905; Brady et al., 1999, p. 153). From there it stretches to their eventual participation in political actions, which can then aim at inciting the electorate to vote for the respective candidate (Strömblad & Myrberg, 2013, p. 1050). Afterwards, the repercussions of this action also have to be considered. Consequently, the dissertation project addressed political mobilization as a process that spans from recruitment to participation in campaigns but also considers its preconditions and effects. The empirical data provides the basis for such a

comprehensive view for the case of the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers. This chapter will thus link the empirical findings to the research questions, which will then allow discussion within the broader literature.

7.1. Potentials and capitals

To understand how processes of political mobilization are linked with mobility, it is necessary to understand the potentials of motorcycle taxi drivers' participation in election campaigns. Following sub-question I., the underlying conditions and resources of motorcycle taxi drivers were outlined within two publications. These addressed the spatialities of mobile motorcycle taxis (Müller, 2024b) as well as the mobility and social potentials of the riders (Müller, 2024c).

Literature on political mobilization in Africa often takes the perspective of politicians (c.f. Krönke et al., 2022; Paget, 2019a, p. 2), while campaign activists are seen as dormant in between elections (Bob-Milliar, 2012, p. 680). Thus, with some recent exceptions (e.g. Brierley & Nathan, 2022; Macdonald et al., 2023) little has been written about their latent potentials for political action. This includes motorcycle-powered activists, whose political participation is mentioned (Nyairo, 2023; Philipps & Kagoro, 2016; Titeca, 2014) but not examined thoroughly. Their recruitment is no coincidence, however. Politicians recruit strategically (Abramson & Claggett, 2001, p. 907) and tend to select those they see as most effective and most easy to mobilize. Group-specific resources (c.f. Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 133) are thus a prerequisite for the political activism of motorcycle taxi riders. While some publications highlight ethnicity and religion as factors for political mobilization in Africa (Koter, 2023; Nathan, 2016; van Wyk, 2018, p. 493), motorcycle taxi drivers were found to be ethnically and religiously diverse. Instead, the empirical findings show that they are mobilized due to their profession-specific capitals, which they share across different settings (c.f. Bob-Milliar, 2012, p. 670).

What sets motorcycle drivers apart from other potential and actual activist groups such as the marked vendors mentioned by Titeca (2014), are their motorcycle-powered mobilities and their professional social networks (c.f. Müller, 2024c) and the unique spatialities that arise from linking the two (Müller, 2024b). Political "*motorcycle taxi activity is thus based on*

the ability of the actors to link different repertoires of status, action and interaction" (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020, p. 12).

a. Mobility

> *"[Politicians] prefer the Boda-Boda because Boda-Boda is flexible. They can reach anywhere"* ((27822PN) Motorcycle taxi rider, Kisumu).

Making a group's resources available and thus mobile for political action (Tilly, 1978, 1.10) is the goal of political mobilization. This implies that being mobile is an advantageous state for political activists, which is reflected in both the theoretical literature (e.g. Bærenholdt, 2013) and works on campaigns in Africa (Paget, 2022, p. 227). In Kenya, for example, mobility costs made up large parts of the overall campaign expenses (Kanyinga & Mboya, 2021, p. 37). The increasing need for mobility within the modernizing election campaigns in Africa (Paget, 2020) requires supporters who can keep up or increase the speed and frequency of campaign activities. Thereby, mobility is not only required to execute established strategies but becomes an essential "technique of mobilization" itself (Sopranzetti, 2014, p. 123). Due to their motorbikes, motorcycle taxi drivers are rich in mobility capital (c.f. Kaufmann et al., 2004) and therefore able to satisfy this demand. This extends across the different dimensions of mobility (c.f. Cresswell, 2010). Being able to get from A to B can be anything but easy on muddy village tracks or the crammed roads of rush hour Nairobi, but in contrast to other road users, motorcycle taxi riders can effectively manoeuvre in these challenging environments. Thus, they can physically access remote places and do so faster than buses, bicycles or private cars. This would not be possible, however, without the navigation and bike handling skills they have acquired over their professional lives. Group-specific mobile practices enable motorcycle taxi riders to climb steep hills or use narrow alleys if it means reaching the destination faster. Additionally, they routinely defy traffic laws to shorten their paths. Their reputation as quick fixes and daredevils as well as other discourses surrounding their mobility, further strengthens their mobility (c.f. Oldenburg, 2019, p. 66). Generally, motorcycle taxi drivers are seen as skilled but aggressive drivers and other road users mostly prefer giving way to risking an accident. This eases their movements and makes motorcyclists even more mobile. This richness in mobility capital turned out to be a common feature of motorcycle taxi drivers across all three examined settings and beyond (Agbiboa,

2019; Sopranzetti, 2014). Furthermore, it is reflected in the ways they are mobilized during campaigns.

b. Social networks

Taxi work depends on constant movements. However, being a successful taxi driver also requires professional ties with customers and peers. Thereby, social networks are both the result of and a precondition to human movements (Manderscheid, 2012, p. 557). As the close relationship between mobility, social networks and power has been emphasized (e.g. Larsen et al., 2007; Urry, 2012), such networks are important to political mobilization because politicians themselves struggle to build and maintain the ties necessary to distribute political messages (Brierley & Nathan, 2021, p. 889; Lockwood, 2022, p. 629). This makes social capital a valuable attribute for political activists (c.f. Cox et al., 1998, p. 448). The social networks of motorcycle taxi riders consist of diverse ties with customers as well as their colleagues and professional associations (Kouassi et al., 2022, p. 1306). Customers either hail motorcycle taxis randomly or become the regulars of particular riders. The combined random and repeated engagements result in a broad social network of weak and strong ties that provide the foundation of their livelihoods. During campaigns, these ties can be used to distribute and gather information or forward a political agenda. Professional social networks also exist between the riders themselves. The strongest of them are found among riders operating from the same location (Doherty, 2022) but some extend to the members of their association and all colleagues (Doherty, 2017, p. 203). While these peer networks may also conduct information, they are more important as mobilization channels. They also strengthen the solidarity amongst riders which is frequently tested during protests (Nyairo, 2023, p. 115). Private networks of individual riders further increase the reach of their mobilization capabilities across age groups and ethnic or religious divides.

c. Spatalities of moving motorcycle taxis

While mobility and social capital build the foundation for the political recruitment of motorcycle taxi drivers, political action often takes place within the spatial environment of their moving motorcycle taxis. As sites for many campaign activities, these spatialities were the focus of two publications of this dissertation project (Müller, 2024b, 2025a). Both used a Harveyan approach to space (D. Harvey, 1969) to describe the moving motorcycle taxis as “small mobile spaces” (Müller, 2024b, p. 11) whose limited size and quick movements

isolated them from their surroundings. Simultaneously, motorcycle rides and the discourses associated with them encourage political debates on the move. These talks further politicalize the riders and thus also become an important campaign strategy. Reflecting on the mobile spatial dynamics of moving motorcycle taxis helps to understand the environment in which mobility and social interaction make riders effective campaign mobilizers. While social networks and mobility are important capitals, the spatialities in which they are made available are important to their success as transport providers and political activists (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020, p. 6).

Another factor that contributes to their mobilization is gender. Being a motorcycle taxi driver is widely considered a tough job suitable only for young men (Nabifo et al., 2021, p. 3; Oldenburg, 2019; Spooner et al., 2020, p. 54). The strenuous and dangerous working conditions are seen as unfit for women who are mostly absent from the workforce (Mensah et al., 2023; Nyairo, 2023, p. 110). Their demographic characteristics and the discourses linked to being a young man, such as courage, noisiness, violent behaviour and the ability to endure physically demanding labour (Oldenburg, 2018, p. 260), are reflected in their political deployment. However, motorcyclists are not the only professional group comprised mainly of young men. While gender and age are thus not a distinctive feature of motorcycle taxi drivers, their demographics nevertheless influence their mobilization. In addition to these characteristics, the constant availability of motorcycle taxi riders sets them apart from other professional groups and allows them to execute diverse tasks that make them 'Swiss army knives' in the hands of political actors who use them in various areas of political competition.

7.2. Recruitment and mobilization

To become campaign activists, motorcycle taxi riders need to be approached and mobilized (Bob-Milliar, 2012, p. 672). Describing the recruitment processes was thus part of sub-question I. To create "moments of mobilization" (Müller, 2024c, p. 372) political actors use the professional networks of the riders, and approach them either at their waiting spots or through their professional associations.

> "*Sometimes [politicians] approach, the county office […] and tell us that we need maybe 200 motorbike operators for a rally. For a roadshow for an MP or an MCA, or wherever. Then*

because we have so many bases and so many chairmen, then we will be given an allocation" ((2922FO) Motorcycle taxi leader, Kisumu).

One of "*the main determinants of a group's mobilization* [is] *its organization* (Tilly, 1978, 3.6). The offices of motorcycle association constitute moorings within a highly mobile work environment from where leaders can be approached easily (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023, p. 404). This and their ability to mobilize large numbers of riders makes them targets for mobilizing politicians (c.f. Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 75; Owino et al., 2024, p. 15). While some associations, especially in Uganda, developed close ties with political parties, pressure from their members to remain neutral and participate in as many paid activities as possible has prevented open party affiliation in most cases (Müller, 2023, p. 20). Associations can have hundreds if not thousands of members and are usually able to mobilize enough riders for all politicians that are campaigning in the respective area. However, *"without giving them money you're not going anywhere with the Boda-Boda"* ((18722FH) Politician, Nairobi).

As for other activists in Africa (Brierley & Nathan, 2022; Paget, 2019a, p. 3), payments are a precondition for most motorcyclist mobilization (Müller, 2024c, p. 377). Whenever the riders pause their business activities to take part in political campaigns, they miss out on parts of their daily income. Even diehard supporters therefore expect payments for their participation, usually in the form of cash money or fuel (Kayinda & Muguzi, 2019, p. 43; Titeca, 2014, p. 197). The facilitation varied across all settings with the perceived wealth and the level of sympathy towards the mobilizing side. Thus, affection towards the financially disadvantaged opposition lowered demands and levelled the playing field in Uganda and the DRC. In Kenya, the sympathies of motorcyclists were divided between the party strongholds. However, the pro "hustler" and Boda-Boda narrative of William Ruto gave his political coalition the edge amongst the riders during the 2022 campaigns (Müller, 2025b, ??). In contrast, a lack of sympathies and trust can also prevent the engagement of riders (c.f. Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 10). In eastern DRC the riders seldom used their social networks to distribute political messages due to their general disregard for the political class and difficulties in tracking and hence receiving pay for such activities (Müller, 2024c, p. 380).

7.3. Techniques of mobilization

Across all case studies, motorcycle taxi riders were mobilized for a number of different campaign activities or techniques of mobilization (sub-question II.). Amongst these campaign activities were rallies, advertisements, provision of transportation, information gathering and distribution and violent action.

a. Rallies

Rallies are the most visible and most emphasized campaign activity that includes motorcyclists. This activity accounts for a huge proportion of their mobilization which is unsurprising, given the importance of rallies for campaigns across Africa (Lynch, 2023). Consequently, politicians at any level and in all countries stated that motorcycle taxi drivers are essential elements of their rallies (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023, p. 401).

Figure 5: Motorcyclist spearheading an UDA rally in Nairobi 2022. Source: Own work.

During rallies, they deploy their mobility and their social networks. In preparation for the rally, motorcyclists often roam the adjacent areas to advertise and transport spectators to the venue. Later they accompany the politicians' motorcade in fleets of up to several hundred motorcycles. Thereby the riders perform stunts and make noise to attract spectators and create the impression of a powerful support base. During subsequent speeches, some riders join the crowd while others head out to transport further spectators. Although, or maybe because, they are known to be a hired force during rallies, motorcyclists are thereby seen as an important indicator of a politician's popularity, wealth and power (Müller, 2025b, p. 7).

The use of motorcycle taxi riders has increased the impact of rallies and led to the implementation of new elements to a traditional campaign strategy. Thereby, the elements

of the rally that profit the most from their mobility, such as the motorcade, have been emphasized in recent campaigns. This makes rallies increasingly "*mobile means of communication that enable the movement of a body that aspires to concentrate political power*" (Larrosa-Fuentes, 2024, p. 426).

b. Advertisement

> *"If somebody puts [on] some T-Shirt with a message and he's riding all over […] he's a moving poster. So, you get many and enclose them with your messages"* ((210318KKB), Former Minister of Interior and presidential candidate Kizza Besigye, Kampala).

Although motorcycle taxi riders advertise during rallies, most advertisement is done beyond that. Riders with politically branded T-shirts, stickers and posters attached to their motorbikes are a common sight during campaigns in all three countries (c.f. Nyairo, 2023, p. 119). While some politicians pay the riders to advertise for them, often the distribution of branded reflective jackets or T-shirts is already seen as a gift. In Kenya and Uganda, riders reported that they own T-shirts in the colours of any major party, which they would wear according to the occasion and their personal preferences. Regular movements and access to remote places guarantee the visibility of these moving billboards. Additionally, riders often engage in political talks with their customers. Thereby the social ties towards their passengers, and discourses that label motorcycle taxi drivers well-informed on political topics, make them convincing advocates (Müller, 2024b, p. 19). Because of this, politicians encourage supporters amongst motorcycle taxi riders to distribute their political agenda to their customers. However, as politicians struggle to validate the execution of the strategy it relies on the political convictions of each rider. If, like in eastern DRC, the general attitude of riders towards the political class is rather negative, politicians are likewise hesitant to pay for this form of advertisement (Müller, 2024c, p. 380).

c. Transportation

While motorcycles carry supporters to political rallies, they also transport other activists to the many campaign events across the constituencies. If a venue is inaccessible by car, or if the campaigning politicians do not own one, they may even use motorcycle taxis themselves. In other cases, using a motorcycle taxi is seen as an act of fraternization with the sector and the working class in general (Goodfellow, 2015, p. 141). Additionally, the mobility

of motorcycles can be used to circumvent hostile roadblocks and avoid police harassment (Crooze FM, 2020). On election day, motorcycles in Uganda and Kenya were also observed to transport voters, to the polling stations (c.f. Bowles et al., 2020, p. 953). Sometimes politicians fund these services as they offer a final opportunity to reach out to potential voters. In parts of Uganda, voters have become accustomed to this service and politicians complained that it has become a prerequisite for inciting citizens to vote at all (Müller, 2025b, p. 8). Naturally, transportation draws heavily on the mobility of motorcyclists. The ability to operate on all kinds of terrain as well as individual movements and their reputation as reliable transporters thereby bolster their use for this strategy.

d. Information

The many social interactions of motorcycle taxi drivers allow them to gather and distribute political information during campaigns. Although this technique often remains hidden, it is widely used and important to politicians of all levels in all settings. Because motorcycle taxi riders are perceived to be well-informed about political opinion in their area of operation, they are one of the few sources of information about the electorate. They often also know about the activities of other candidates and the police, which in Uganda posed a threat to the campaigns of the opposition (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 50). Furthermore, motorcyclists can safely transport and distribute information and documents, especially in times of phone network outages. Unsurprisingly, police and intelligence agencies also make use of motorcycles to disguise their operatives as taxi drivers. In repressive settings such as Uganda, this posed a constant threat to the political campaigns of opposition politicians who suffered harassment, abduction and torture by state institutions (Müller, 2024b).

e. Violence

> *"We are the people who are burning the tyres there" ((2922FO) Motorcycle taxi rider, Kisumu).*

In all three case studies, election campaigns saw political violence (Garbe, 2023; Trapido, 2021; Waddilove, 2019, p. 336). Thereby motorcycle taxi drivers were often seen at the forefront of violent action (Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 76). They were reported to attack the rallies, create roadblocks and disturb the voting process but also to be used to defend against such attacks. Motorcycle taxi riders are used because they enjoy a reputation as being violent, due to their daily conflicts with other road users.

"They are the youth who are used to fight the other opponents and […] able to play the role of evading […]. Because again, motorbikes are fast enough to get away" ((9722SN) Politician, Nairobi).

> *"These Boda-Boda guys [are] being very effective in protecting you and at times they can even transfer you from a hostile zone leaving your car behind" ((30722SO) Politician, Siaya).*

Their mobility allows motorcycle taxi riders to strike quickly and disappear. Like other techniques of mobilization, the violent deployment of motorcyclists was common amongst ruling and opposition parties across the research settings. Although the risks and a general rejection of violence prevent most riders from participating in violent activities, strong political affiliations and high payments successfully incited a minority. While the use of violence has reportedly declined, especially during the 2022 elections in Kenya, it remains a challenge to campaigns (c.f. Ochieng et al., 2023).

8. Effects of motorcyclist mobilization

"[The] c*ontemporary body of scholarship has generally proved stronger at analysing the causes than the consequences of participation*" (Norris, 2009, p. 637). Thus, this chapter addresses the effects of motorcycle taxi mobilization as an important aspect of the mobility-mobilization nexus. In his book 'From Mobilization to Revolution' Charles Tilly states, that the mobilization of activists precedes collective action, including violence that can ultimately lead to revolution (Tilly, 1978). In comparison to that, the findings of this dissertation have shown that motorcycle taxi drivers support different political sides and can hardly be considered a coherent subversive force aiming to overthrow the government. Nevertheless, the question remains: Is there something revolutionary about motorcycle taxi mobilization? Following sub-questions III. and IV., different publications of this dissertation analysed the impacts of the riders' mobilization on the political, economic and social spheres. These ranged from effects on the conduct of campaigns (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023) and freedom of speech (Müller, 2024b) to their social acceptance (Müller, 2024a) and effects on their taxi work (Müller, 2023).

8.1. Effects on election campaigns

The widespread and repeated mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers had profound impacts on the conduct of political campaigns in the researched settings. Importantly, the use of motorcyclists accelerates general tendencies towards more mobile campaigns (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023, p. 404). Thereby, established strategies, like the rally, are refined by replacing less mobile activists with motorcyclists. The use of motorcycles also enables new mobile campaign strategies. This includes individual transport services and the use of violent mobile groups. However, great mobility comes with great expenses (c.f. Ludwig-Mayerhofer & Behrend, 2015, p. 338). The mobilization of motorcyclists requires payments that accelerate the already ongoing monetarization of election campaigns (c.f. Paget, 2023; Wilkins, 2016, p. 629). As the campaigning politicians usually shoulder these additional costs, only staunch supporters amongst the riders might bear some of the cost themselves. In Uganda and Congo, larger support for the opposition thus equalized the abilities of different political factions in regard to the deployment of motorcycle taxi drivers (Müller, 2024c, p. 367; Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023, p. 404). Equal mobilization by all political sides helps to ensure continuous support for the sector throughout the political spectrum (c.f. Brierley & Kramon, 2020, p. 586). At the same time, the universal and prolific use of motorcycle taxi riders has allegedly led to a decline in the mobilization of other activist groups such as vendors, students and women's groups (c.f. Macdonald et al., 2023; Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 71; Torrenté, 2013, p. 538). However, no comparative data on this is currently available. Nevertheless, shifts in activist mobilizations are likely, given the heavy use of motorcyclists and their close connections with politicians as well as general notions that increased mobility for some can result in immobility for other groups (e.g. Cresswell, 2006, p. 249).

The effects of motorcycle taxi drivers on election campaigns can thus be summarized as making campaigns more mobile, advancing monetarization tendencies, enabling new strategies and altering the structural composition of activists.

8.2. Effects on the motorcycle taxi sector

As a result of their repeated mobilization, motorcycle taxi drivers are widely perceived as skilled campaigners and politically-knowledgeable influencers. Therefore, most politicians try to win their sympathies by addressing their needs both during and outside of campaigns. These clientelist relationships can take various forms. In Uganda, President Museveni has

issued an informal decree to remove all taxes on motorcycle taxis, though not on bicycle taxis, that has widely been followed (Müller, 2023, p. 22). Beyond that, local authorities prevented or scrapped bans on motorcycle taxi operations while many politicians erected sunshades for the riders within their constituency (Owino et al., 2024, p. 13). Furthermore, some politicians, like Uganda's opposition leader Bobi Wine, have invested heavily in buying and renting out motorcycles. They provide him with financial returns as well as a large force of loyal and mobile activists. Likewise, the Ugandan and Kenyan governments run extensive schemes to support the motorcycle taxi sector through loans, training and assisted organization (Muwanga et al., 2023, 74f). The latter is thereby part of an attempt to gain control of the important professional associations (Müller, 2024b). While in Uganda the government pressures associations to elect sympathizers into leadership positions (Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 74), other association leaders have, for ideological or economic reasons, developed ties to other parties. Although the association members remain politically divided, the leadership takes a key position in their mobilization because they act as a bottleneck for mobilization requests. However, the pressure from the members to participate in as many paid activities as possible has forced the bulk of associations to remain open to different political sides (Müller, 2024c, p. 375)

In general, the sector profits heavily from its political importance. Political patronage and investments, in combination with widespread hesitance to regulate and thereby anger the riders have given motorcycle taxi drivers an advantage over competing transporters like buses, shared taxis and private cars. This is emphasized by the ideological empowerment of the sector. Hailed as a provider of employment and mobility, restrictions have become highly unpopular despite the frequent accidents (c.f. Daily Monitor, 2022). The mutual dependency between motorcycle taxi riders and politicians thus impacts the transport systems of the studied countries (c.f. Müller, 2023). While the mutual dependency made motorcyclist more mobile through subsidies and lack of controls, it made their services cheap and available to the population. The subsequent rise in the numbers of motorcycle taxi riders has, in turn, made them an even more prominent and available social group and increased their political use.

8.3. Effects on elections?

> *"No candidate has ever gone to parliament, even at this local level, without using the Boda-Bodas"* ((160318SOS) District Chairman, Western Uganda).

But does the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi riders affect election results? Numerous politicians in all three countries claimed that their personal success was indeed the result of effective motorcyclist mobilization.

> *"The last [election] I won with over 1800 votes. And that was the result of good mobilization with Boda-Boda"* ((240418LGO) Vice district chairman, northern Uganda).

Despite such claims, the widespread and often mirrored deployment of motorcyclists by all competitors, and a lack of sufficient data made it difficult to identify possible differences and thus the effects of their presence on the ballots. Additionally, a large number of other factors affect the voters' decisions and make it difficult to single out the impact of motorcyclist mobilization. This would most likely require follow-up research that might use a quantitative approach. Nevertheless, it is relevant to note that the perceived importance contributes quite substantially to the reproduction of discourses that link motorcycle taxi drivers to successful campaigns and electoral success in general.

8.4. Effects on the freedom of speech

During interviews, riders and politicians alike repeatedly stated that motorcycle taxi drivers and their customers frequently engage in political discussions whilst being on the move. Such mentions of open political debate are not trivial, especially for Uganda where free political speech is no longer guaranteed (c.f. Cohen & McIntyre, 2020). Political discussions that take place in a publicly known environment can face state repression and dissidents are regularly intimidated, arrested and subject to state violence. While shared taxis were no longer mentioned as political arenas, probably due to this pressure (c.f. Mutongi, 2017, p. 158), political talks continue on motorcycle taxis. During ride-alongs, it became possible to understand why this is the case (Müller, 2025a). They revealed that the moving motorcycle provides spatial conditions that enable free political speech. On the move, it becomes almost impossible to monitor or record the conversations, while the lined-up sitting position creates both closeness and anonymity between the driver and the passenger. These spatialities

match with the relational motorcycle taxi space that already includes gossiping and vivid discussions and enables private and safe political conversations. This allows riders to promote different political sides and, in return, collect opinions about them from the electorate (Müller, 2024b).

Although politicians encourage riders to forward their agenda, they can ultimately not control what is discussed during the ride. While the campaign strategy thus politicizes the debates on motorcycles, their content remains unchecked and open for free speech. The mobile motorcycle taxi space therefore allows passengers to avoid state, as well as social, backlash and makes politicians even more dependent on the goodwill of the riders. Within the small mobile space of moving motorcycles, "*mobility and space are linked in a productive sense that builds on a relational conception of power*" (Jensen, 2011, p. 258) to open up spaces of free speech within a repressive environment through powerful mobilities. This lack of control greatly contributes to the political patronage and support the motorcycle taxi sector receives from all political sides in all researched countries.

9. The mobilization-mobility nexus

The mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers remains closely linked to mobility throughout the process of their political engagement. At first, the group's inherent mobility capital is activated through moments of mobilization (Müller, 2024c, p. 371). As described by Peter Adey (2017, p. 152), mobile capital enables powerful unforced movements (c.f. Urry, 2007, pp. 51–52). This is recognised and strategically mobilized for political campaigns (Müller, 2024c) and is a criterion for the selection of campaign activists. Because mobile activists are flexible and can reach the voters directly, but can also provide mobility to other activists (c.f. Sopranzetti, 2014), mobility then becomes the propellant of powerful mobile campaign practices (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023). The addition of mobile activists strengthens political campaigns and makes each campaign activity more mobile. In the case study sites, this is supported by discourses that link mobile strategies with political power. In combination with electoral success, these discourses prompt political actors to establish patronage networks towards the mobile activists which help to strengthen their mobility (c.f. Müller, 2023, 2025b). This makes their patterns of mobility dominant and the group even more likely to be recruited during future campaigns. Over time, successfully repeated mobilization cycles can solidify this mutually beneficial relationship and lead to deeply

entrenched patterns of mobility that become increasingly associated with power, the ruling class and their respective systems of government (c.f. Daily Monitor, 2022; Paterson, 2014; Sheller, 2016).

While this mobility-mobilization nexus is based on empirical data from the three case studies, its implications are worthy of being discussed within the broader literature on mobility and political mobilization. The findings indicate that access to mobility is much more directly involved in the production of political power than many previous works on the topic would suggest (e.g. Adey, 2017; Cass & Manderscheid, 2010; Jensen, 2011). While states exercise power by maintaining control over mobilities (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013, p. 195), power structures within them are not only implicitly shaped by movements of citizens (c.f. P. Harvey & Knox, 2012) but also directly defined through the effects of mobile political mobilization and elections. While limiting access to mobility has been described as preventing groups from accessing political power (Cresswell, 2012a, 650f; Hannam et al., 2006), this dissertation shows that the opposite is equally true. Through the same re-enforcing effects of power and spatalities (Jensen, 2011, p. 258) activists can increase their mobility and thus their social and political participation.

At an abstract level, the mobility-mobilization nexus entails powerful political actors who activate mobile capitals to aide them in the reproduction of their power. To do so they use some of their resources e.g. money. If this is successful and political power is reproduced, the forms of mobility that take part in the process become the recipients of additional social and material benefits as a result of their ties to the political actors. This not only strengthens these mobilities in comparison to other forms of mobility but also establishes them as a tool of power production and thus makes repeated mobilizations more likely.

Based on this, the mobility-mobilization nexus can be used as a lens to review the role of mobility within processes of power production through political mobilization in electoral systems and beyond. It thereby provides a holistic and empirically-supported example of how mobility becomes an essential asset to political activists, campaign practices and the processes of political power-production through competitive elections. This expands existing literature that highlights the role of mobility for some aspects of election campaigns like activism (Cresswell, 2006, p. 198), rallies (Larrosa-Fuentes, 2024) or voting (Pattie et al., 1996). It connects the dots of these previous publications and highlights the whole process

of competitive elections as one way in which "*mobilities are both the productive of social [power] relations and produce them*" (Cresswell, 2010, p. 21). The costs of powerful mobilities and the immobilites that correlate with their application (Adey, 2017, p. 50; Urry, 2007, 190f) also become visible in empirical data. To recruit mobile activists, political actors have to spend considerable amounts of resources. This not only strains budgets and monetarizes campaigns but also leads to a prioritization of spending. More mobile activists might thereby not only add their mobility to political campaigns but also crowd out other, less mobile activists and thus reduce their political participation and influence. While this dissertation highlights the empowering role of mobility for campaign activists, the effects of their empowerment on other activist groups might provide the basis for additional publications.

Additionally, other already-described forms of power reproduction by mobile groups (c.f. Bradbury, 2006; Manderscheid, 2016; Richardson & Jensen, 2008) might, as well, be part of a circular relationship within a mobility-mobilization nexus. Reviewing them through the lens of the mobility-mobilization nexus could detect the broader flows of power in which these practices are embedded. The reciprocal element between power and mobilities thus deserves additional attention within the current literature on mobilities and is likely to supplement and expand the previous studies. Furthermore, using the nexus might help to identify additional important forms in which mobility and power interact.

Over the course of this dissertation, some topics emerged that could profit from being reviewed through the lens of the mobility-mobilization nexus. These include the role of gender for the mobilization of motorcyclists (c.f. Cresswell, 2012b, 175ff; Cresswell & Uteng, 2016) and the role of mobility within electoral violence (c.f. Tilly, 1978, 6.1).

10. Conclusion

Mobility is a principle of modernity (Kesselring, 2006, p. 270). As such, it is also a principle of modern human society and democratic systems of government (Bærenholdt, 2013; Cresswell, 2006, p. 162; Urry, 2007, p. 17), as well as of authoritarian rule (Zhang, 2018). This dissertation builds on these notions to review the role of mobility in the context of election campaigns and political mobilization.

Based on the mobility paradigm (Sheller, 2014), it uses Creswell's concept of mobility (2010) to examine motorcycle taxi drivers in Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo as political activists. The empirical data collection on which this dissertation is based uses a mobile multisited ethnography approach and research conducted between 2018 and 2022. The data helped to identify diverse links between mobility and the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers. These links spanned across the mobilization process and made mobility visible as an important vehicle of power production through electoral political mobilization. By describing mobility as an important asset of campaign activists, the project expands a rich literature on conceptualizing the politics of mobility (c.f. Bærenholdt, 2013; Jensen, 2011; Larrosa-Fuentes, 2024), which so far has not addressed the topic.

Mobility capital is seen as a valuable asset for potential activists, which prompts strategically-mobilizing political actors to approach them (Müller, 2024c). It is then also a key component of almost all of the numerous strategies that motorcyclists engage in during election campaigns (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023). This makes it the foundation of their effective and widespread participation. The heavy use of mobile activists has resulted in various changes in the conduct of ground campaigns. It enabled new strategies and made the existing strategies more mobile. In the process, mobility also contributed to the already ongoing monetarization and mobilization of election campaigns. In turn, their political engagement reflects back onto the motorcycle taxi riders, who enjoy far-ranging patronage, including financial benefits, thanks to their political importance. This fuels their mobility and in turn, further increases their mobilizability. This mobility-mobilization nexus results in the establishment of strong ties between motorcycle taxi riders and political actors. Although these ties are mutually beneficial, politicians seek to reduce their dependency on this group of activists. Therefore, the motorcycle taxi sector faces ongoing attempts by politicians to gain control over it. To fend off such attempts, the riders equally rely on movements, mobile practices and discourses on mobility (Müller, 2023). Mobility is thus an increasingly important element within processes of political power reproduction in these electoral settings. Mobility-rich groups can use this and profit from mobilization. Thereby they strengthen their own mobility as well as their political relevancy by trading access to their mobility for economic and social benefits.

A key contribution of this research is that it is able to single out mobility as a resource that allows a group to become important campaign activists. While the example of motorcycle taxi drivers is outstanding, due to their homogeny and high mobility, the dissertation has found similar patterns in three different countries. This makes a more general relationship between mobility and patterns of mobilization likely. Thus, the findings call for the examination of mobilization patterns in other settings, which might reveal previously hidden linkages of mobilization, mobility and power.

In the near future, the deep political embeddedness and the mutually reinforcing relationship between political mobilization and mobility is likely to solidify the role of motorcyclists within election campaigns. This might ensure the continuity of the already high levels of motorcyclist mobilization in Uganda and Kenya. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the takeover of the research sites by soldiers of the M23 movement has most likely interrupted interactions between political parties and motorcycle taxi drivers. This shows how unstable statehood and the abolition of competitive elections constitute threats to the status quo of the mobility-mobilization nexus. If elections are no longer conducted, or no longer competitive, the need for costly campaign activists ceases. As a result, patronage networks and mobility benefits could also decrease. Further potential threats to the political importance of motorcycle taxi riders might be the digitalization of election campaigns (c.f. Mutsvairo, 2016) and popular resistance against the lack of state control over a sector that is accused of causing accidents, crime and a worsening traffic situation (c.f. Wanume et al., 2019). Despite such threats, mobility remains a powerful capital that will most likely help motorcycle taxy riders to prevail politically in the years to come.

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Appendix 1: Interview guidelines

Interview Guidelines for politicians:

- Introduction: I am Carsten Möller, from Bayreuth University, my research is about political mobilization in Uganda
- Introduction: Who are you, how old are you, what do you do for a living?
    - Position? / Party?
- Can you tell me about the political situation in town?
    - Which Parties are active / which parties are strong?
    - Why are these parties strong here?
- What techniques/strategies are you using to mobilize people during your campaign?
    - Whom do you mobilize?
    - Why did you mobilize these groups? (Tasks)

Boda-Boda specific questions.

- Did you or your party mobilize Boda-Boda riders in the past for political purposes?
    - Whom did you mobilize? Which association, which group of riders? Why them?
    - On what occasion did you mobilize them?
    - Why did you mobilize Boda-Bodas in particular?
    - What did they do for the campaign?
    - What effects did it have on your campaign?
    - Did you pay them for their activities? Or did you help them in other ways?
- Did other political parties or candidates (also) use Boda-Bodas for their campaigns?
    - Whom did they use?
    - When?
    - What did they do for them? (Any difference to your campaign?)
    - What effects did it have?
    - How did it influence your own campaign?
    - Did they receive anything for it from the other party?
- Do parties differ in the way they mobilize Boda-Boda riders?

- Are Boda-Bodas mobilized differently in different towns or regions?
- Have Bodas always been used like that in Ugandan politics?
    - When did it start?
    - How has the Use of Bodas for Campaigns developed?

No use of Bodas:

- Why didn't you mobilize Boda-Boda riders? (In contrast to others)
- Would you want to do it in further campaigns?
- What do you think generally about Boda-Bodas campaigning for political actors?
- Apart from Parties, who mobilized Boda-Bodas in Soroti and Uganda?
    - Why do you think they mobilize Bodas?
    - What do they need them for? (how)

Contacts: Who else should I talk to about political mobilization?

Interview guidelines for Motorcyclists:

- Introduction: I am Carsten Möller, from Bayreuth University; my research is about the political participation of Boda-Boda riders.

- Introduction: Who are you, how old are you, what do you do for a living?
    - Position?
- How is the situation in town for Boda-Boda riders?
    - How many riders are active in town?
    - How are Bodas in town organized? Which association are there? How big are they? How is their relationship?
    - Is there a lot of competition?
- Which Party do you support?
    - Why?
- How is the political situation in town?
    - Which Parties are active / which parties are strong?
    - Why are these parties strong here?

- Do Associations have a political profile here? Or is someone in politics supporting them?
- Have you or the association ever become active for political parties or candidates?
    - For which party/candidate? On which political level?
    - When did you become active?
    - **What did you do to support a political actor?**
    - What made you support this candidate? (gifts, patronage, Money, because you supported him politically)
    - What effect did your activity have? Did it influence elections?
- Did other Riders/Associations also become active for a political party/candidate?
    - What did they do?
    - For whom?
    - Did they receive anything?
- Would you like to become active for political parties in the future?
- What do you think generally about Boda-Bodas campaigning for political actors?
- Apart from Parties, who mobilized Boda-Bodas in town, the country?
    - Why do you think they mobilize Bodas?
    - What do they need them for? (how)

Not mobilized:

- Would you want to support a candidate in further elections? / What would it need to make you participate?
- What do you think about Boda-Boda riders campaigning for political parties?

Effects:

- How has Boda-Boda mobilization shaped the Boda-Boda industry?
- What effects did your political involvement have on you personally?
- How did Boda-Boda mobilization influence forms of mobility?
- What political influence do Boda-Boda riders possess?
-

Contacts: Who else should I talk to about Boda-Boda mobilization?

Interview Guidelines Independents:

Introduction: Who are you, how old are you, what do you do for a living?

Position?

How do you see the current presidential campaigns?

- What are the strategies of the different candidates?
- Who is performing well? Why?
- Who is not? Why?

Who is mobilizing groups for political purposes?

Who is mobilized?

- What role do they play within campaigns, of Presidential, MP, and LCV candidates?
- Why are they mobilized?
- What are they mobilized for?
- Which techniques are used?

What effect does this mobilization have on Elections?

- Measurable results
- Results on Power relation
- Other results?

How does the relationship between the mobilizer and the mobilized look like?

- During campaigns
- Outside campaigns
- How has the relationship developed?

Does mobilization have an influence on the policy towards these Groups?

- Influence on other (mobile) groups?

Appendix 2: Code variables

Code system:

- Organisation of motorcycle taxis

    - Numbers in figures (for the respective sites)
    - Regulation and management
    - Associations
- Political Economies of Motorcycle Taxis
- Politics
    - Histories of Politicians
    - Party affiliations of riders /Associations
    - Political developments at the site
- Perceptions
    - “Attributes” of motorcycle taxi drivers
    - Opinion on motorcycle taxi drivers
    - Opinion of state and politics
    - Self-perception of motorcycle taxi drivers
- Impacts of motorcycle taxi driver mobilization
    - Effects on motorcycle taxi drivers
    - Effects on elections
    - Other Effects
- History of motorcycle taxis
    - History of individual riders
    - History of the political engagement of motorcycle taxi drivers
    - Motorcycle taxi drivers and criminal activities
- Motorcycle taxi driver Mobilization
    - Reasons and advantages of motorcycle taxi driver mobilization
    - Types of mobilization
        - Regular
        - Destructive
    - Payments

Appendix 3: Statutory declaration

I hereby affirm that I have produced the thesis at hand without any inadmissible help from a third party or the use of resources other than those cited; ideas incorporated directly or indirectly from other sources are clearly marked as such. In addition, I affirm that I have neither used the services of commercial consultants or intermediaries in the past nor will I use such services in the future. The thesis in the same or similar form has hitherto not been presented to another examining authority in Germany or abroad, nor has it been published.

_____

Carsten Müller
Bayreuth 10.03.2025

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ARTICLE

The fast and the victorious: Mobility, motorcyclists and political mobilisation in Uganda

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Abstract

As in other African countries, activists in Uganda play an important role during political campaigns. Monetary handouts, called 'transport refund', often facilitate their participation. Although these handouts often cover more than just the costs of transportation, the label indicates that mobility is seen as an important financial item for campaign activists. Despite this, little has been published about the role that mobility plays in the processes of political mobilisation in Africa. This article therefore examines mobility as an important yet neglected aspect of political mobilisation by evaluating the role of motorcycle taxi riders during elections in Uganda. Usually referred to as Boda-Bodas, they are essential short-distance transport providers in the country. Beyond that, being Boda-Boda has become a way of survival, a form of social organisation, and a promise that every youth can make a living if he dares to face the dangers of the country's accident-prone roads. Politicians have since discovered the potential of these bold young men and recruit them *en masse* ahead of elections. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2022, this paper examines the unique mobilities inherent in Boda-Bodas. It finds that characteristic mobilities enable their movements as transport providers and argues that these mobilities also enhance political rallies. Boda-Boda motorcycle riders have therefore become a crucial activist group during political campaigns in Uganda.

KEYWORDS

Africa, mobility, political mobilisation, qualitative research, rallies

1 | INTRODUCTION

The city of Mbarara, home to Uganda's long-time President Museveni, is a no-go area for opposition presidential candidates. Like others before him, presidential candidate Patrick Amuriat encountered a police roadblock during the 2020/21 campaigns as his convoy tried to enter the city. When attempts to circumvent it failed, he jumped on the back of a motorcycle taxi and disappeared. Using the motorcycle to break through another checkpoint, and knocking down the district police commander, he resurfaced in the city centre, where his supporters cheered him in surprise (CroozeFM, 2020).

This incident drew media attention to the candidate but also highlights the political potential of motorcycle taxi riders colloquially known as Boda-Bodas.

As transport providers for millions of Ugandans within the public transport system of the country, Boda-Bodas are well studied (Gamberini, 2014; Goodfellow & Mukwaya, 2021; Wanume et al., 2019). Likewise, their participation in political campaigns has been mentioned repeatedly (Doherty, 2017; Raynor, 2014; Spooner et al., 2020). Mostly consisting of side notes, however, these mentions are generally not specific as to the reasons for their regular involvement, and only Titeca (2014) highlights the importance of their social networks for political participation. Furthermore, the role of mobility within political mobilisation in Africa has also only been hinted at so far (see Bowles et al., 2020, p. 953; Paget, 2022, p. 227). In this article, we therefore delve into how mobility is a major propellant for activist participation that enables Boda-Bodas to support campaigns and makes them an important political asset.

Focusing on 'mobilities', we analyse how and why Boda-Bodas are mobile and how this defines their role as a distinct group of campaign activists. This article is thereby contributing to an expanding set of literature that examines the relationship between mobility and political power (Bærenholdt, 2013; Paterson, 2014; Rau, 2011), as well as to the study of party mobilisation (Lockwood et al., 2022) and campaign activists in sub-Saharan Africa (Paget, 2019a). To do so, we analyse the involvement of Boda-Boda motorcyclists in the production of political rallies. By building on the work of Dan Paget (e.g. Paget, 2019b), we examine how Boda-Bodas make use of physical movements, mobile practice and representations of mobility to become 'effective campaign activists' (Bob-Milliar, 2012).

Our methodological approach consists of (semi-)structured and narrative interviews, informal conversations and observation. We draw on data gathered during several research periods in Uganda between March 2018 and September 2022. In total, we conducted 150 interviews with politicians, Boda-Boda riders, journalists and state officials in nine different districts in all four regions of the country and in the capital, Kampala. Additionally, we observed campaign practices during the 2021 general elections by following politicians from the sub-county level up to the presidential level during their campaign activities. The collected data was later coded and processed using MAXQDA software.

In what follows, the paper introduces Boda-Boda motorcycle taxi riders in Uganda before outlining the mobility lens used to develop a broader understanding of the group's mobility and the role of mobility within political mobilisation. Based on this, it describes and analyses Boda-Boda participation in political rallies in Uganda.

2 | BODA-BODA IN UGANDA: MOBILE AND MOBILISED

> Boda-Boda is a very good business. And Boda-Boda has given us some pride. (Boda-Boda leader, eastern Uganda)

From 1991 to 2020, Uganda's population doubled to more than 40 million people (Osiebe, 2020, p. 90), with more than 2 million inhabitants in its capital, Kampala (UNBS, 2016). As public transport in the city is largely based on minibuses (Goodfellow & Mukwaya, 2021; Siya et al., 2019, p. S134), roads are frequently congested and fast motorcycle taxis, called Boda-Bodas, have become popular. Customers value them for their availability and ability to bypass the daily traffic, while in the rural areas they ensure access to villages that are not connected to bus services or to the road network at all (Divall et al., 2021). In some places, using a Boda-Boda is the only alternative to walking (Öbom, 2020, p. 13), making it the most widespread form of short-distance transport in Uganda, and an important economic sector, employing almost 3% of the county's population in 2014 (UNBS, 2016, p. 29). Recently, however, Boda-Bodas have been criticised for disobeying traffic rules, causing accidents (Siya et al., 2019; Tumwesigye et al., 2016) and are suspected of harbouring criminal elements (Wanume et al., 2019, p. 2).

Boda-Bodas possess a high level of internal organisation, with the so-called 'stage' as the smallest but most important entity, and umbrella associations uniting riders at local and regional levels (Goodfellow, 2015, p. 138). A stage consists of 15–200 riders who share a common parking space. It provides them with basic services such as savings and loans groups and with mediators in case of disputes (Raynor, 2014, p. 32). Associations or cooperatives function as umbrella groups for the Boda-Bodas of a specific area. They protect the interests of their members in relation to the authorities, as well as to other Boda-Boda groups, solve internal disputes and gazette stages (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 52f.).

Due to their organisation and common interests, Boda-Bodas show a strong cohesion (Kisaalita & Sentongo-Kibalama, 2007, p. 354). This sense of brotherhood is strongest amongst riders of one stage but even riders who do not know each other will help each other against police persecution, or in the case of accidents (Doherty, 2017, p. 205). Occasionally, Boda-Bodas can also unite to pursue common interests, such as the rejection of state regulation or taxation (Daily Monitor, 2020).

In 2001, Boda-Bodas made political headlines for the first time when a motorcyclist transported President Museveni to his election nomination ceremony (Goodfellow, 2015, p. 141). Five years later, after the reintroduction of multiparty elections, they became activists during the campaigns. The general elections in 2011 finally saw their breakthrough when convoys of several hundred Boda-Bodas became a common sight (Interview, Crispin Kaheru, civil rights activist). In the following elections, in 2016 and 2021, their role expanded, and Boda-Bodas were mobilised to carry out diverse tasks for candidates of all political parties.

3 | THE POLITICS OF BODA-BODA MOBILITY

Although primarily transport providers, Boda-Bodas also use their bikes for political participation. In what follows, we outline our approach to the politics of mobility, arguing that a mobility lens that aims to provide a deeper understanding of Boda-Boda mobilisation needs to look beyond the tempo-spatial relocation process of physical mobility and to inquire into the propelling factors that enable it (Sheller, 2011).

The mobility paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) takes the multiple connections between physical movement, society and power into account (Hannam et al., 2006) and recognises mobility as a constituting element, as well as a result of social institutions and practices (Sheller & Urry, 2006). We follow Cresswell (2010) in understanding mobility as the interplay of physical movement, representations of mobility and mobile practice. Physical movement as the basic entity of mobility is the measurable and mappable act of relocating from one place to another through time and space and is described as the 'spatialization of time and temporalization of space' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 4). Mobility also has multiple meanings and reasons (Adey, 2017) and these representations include symbolic or ideological attributions attached to certain movements. So, the same movement can be experienced quite differently as either a recreational hike or a commute. Such discursive representations of mobility also affect policies and lay the foundation for the manifestation of the mobile in our landscapes (Jensen, 2014). As a result, they influence the way we look at a certain movement but also the way we move ourselves (Cresswell, 2010). Understanding how mobility is practised refers to the means used to conduct the physical movement but also the modus operandi (Adey, 2017, p. 3). Through physical mobility, representations and mobile practice, mobility ultimately becomes a physical but meaningful and experienceable entity (Cresswell, 2006).

Also Leese and Wittendorp (2017), for the security/mobility nexus, have explored the extent to which physical movement, practices of mobility and stasis, and the representation of im/mobilities are political. Access, reach and pace of mobility are already tied to questions of social inequality (Manderscheid, 2016). The different interests in representations of mobility and immobility need to be understood just as much as the social and economic conditions of different practices, motivations and routes of mobility.

In what follows, and by taking political rallies as a case, we empirically contextualise the nexus of mobility and political mobilisation by analysing the politics of Boda-Boda mobility. To exemplify how Boda-Boda mobility has become political, we analyse Boda-Bodas' participation in rallies, where they are a crucial canvassing instrument in many electoral systems in Africa (Paget, 2019b).

4 | MOVING RALLIES

> They are very good. You know they have this feeling of motorcades for state visits. Then [also as] outriders, and therefore they are very good for politics. For political visibility. I have also used them for transportation, because they can navigate the badly done roads. (Salaamu Musumba, vice chairperson FDC)

Since 2006, the use of Boda-Bodas in Uganda has spread all over the country. Likewise, Boda-Boda mobilisation has diversified, and new techniques have emerged during each election cycle. Over the course of our research, politicians and riders mentioned multiple different uses for Boda-Bodas, ranging from gathering and distributing information, participation in rallies and transporting voters, to their use as a violent crowd against political opponents.

While all these tactics are applied separately, we found that political rallies contain several of them within a temporally and locally confined setting. Therefore, we use the political rally to show how their mobility provides Boda-Boda riders with a distinct set of capabilities that sets them apart as an important group of political activists in Uganda.

Despite the growing importance of social media, face-to-face campaigning remains the most common form of electoral canvassing in Africa (Paget, 2020). Politicians in Uganda usually conduct rallies in order to physically engage with

as many voters as possible within a short time. When asked why they were using rallies as a means of campaigning, politicians above the sub-county level repeatedly mentioned that the size of their constituency made door-to-door canvassing impossible. Although the intensity of the engagement remains comparatively weak, rallies allow for hundreds or thousands of participants at once, while the cost per engagement remains low (Paget, 2019b). According to Paget (2020, p. 14), almost 60% of Ugandans attended at least one political rally, which is the third highest percentage in sub-Saharan Africa (see also Conroy-Krutz, 2016, p. 522). The short period assigned to political campaigns ahead of elections in Uganda further contributes to the popularity of rallies. With only 2 months of campaigning time and a limited number of attendees in the 2020/2021 campaigns, candidates needed to maximise exposure by often holding several rallies a day. Despite strict COVID-19 regulations and widespread police harassment (Cheeseman, 2021), opposition candidates relied on rallies due to limited access to the state-controlled TV and radio landscape (Abrahamsen & Bareebe, 2016).

4.1 | The role of Boda-Bodas

Rallies in Uganda usually follow the same pattern. A few days before the event, candidates mobilise advertisers, activists and mobile PA systems to announce the rally within the vicinity of the town, village or neighbourhood (Krönke et al., 2022; Paget, 2020). On the day of the event, the politician then drives to the venue, accompanied by a motorcade of supporters. This aims at attracting the attention of the residents and acts as a show of force (Paget, 2020, p. 22). Upon arrival at the designated venue, musicians or comedians sometimes then set the mood for the political speeches (Paget, 2019b, p. 459). At rallies of presidential or parliamentary candidates, lower-level party candidates are often invited to give introductory speeches to profit from the public interest in national candidates while also acting as intermediaries between the local population and the party dignitaries. After the appearance of the main speaker, the rally regularly finishes with the distribution of gifts and further entertainment (Conroy-Krutz, 2016, p. 533). This cycle can be repeated several times a day, as politicians often conduct multiple rallies consecutively.

Boda-Boda riders play an important role in the 'production' (Paget, 2020, p. 1) of these rallies as Raynor (2014, p. 43) and Titeca (2014, p. 28) have indicated previously. During interviews and observations, we noticed four distinct tasks that Boda-Bodas perform over the different stages of a rally: advertising, participating in the motorcade, transportation and attending the speeches. Although Boda-Bodas are not the only activist group mobilised to support rallies, as Titeca (2014) has shown, we found that they are omnipresent at rallies of both the incumbent and opposition candidates.

Prior to the rally, Boda-Bodas are hired to advertise the event. This can take place in the form of talks to customers and bystanders, the exhibition of posters or by carrying small PA systems on their motorbikes.

> I could mobilise them before I go for my rally. [...]. Go and inform people that now I'm coming to town. [...]. So, they would be in front of me. Going and mobilising people: My candidate is going to this place, he is coming to talk to us and to sell his manifesto to us. So, they would mobilise the parish. The Bodas [...] who are ahead of me with my photos, my portrait, with my manifesto, distributing it to people, so that when I now go, I get many people. (Politician, eastern Uganda)

As soon as the politician arrives in the area, Boda-Bodas are called to take part in the motorcade (Paget, 2020, p. 25). For this, they wear branded T-shirts and carry flags, posters and stickers of the respective candidate (see Figure 1). Additionally, they perform stunts on their motorbikes and honk to further draw attention to the motorcade. '[W]hen they are moving with their motorcycles and blowing those horns, tweet tweet, and call out his names and other things. They are very good at making mobilisation for people' (Boda-Boda leader, northern Uganda). After reaching the venue of the rally, Boda-Boda riders can be assigned two different roles. While some might take the role of claqueurs who cheer the speech of the politician, others can be tasked to roam the streets to conduct further advertising and carry spectators to the venue for free. 'We carry people to go and attend in the rallies. So, it's mainly attending the rallies and carrying people and mobilising to support' (Boda-Boda leader, Kampala). If the organising politicians holds further rallies in close proximity on the same day, the mobilised Boda-Boda riders might follow him to the next location and re-enact the same strategies. If the next rally is far away, however, Boda-Bodas from that area are usually mobilised to make use of their local embeddedness and to avoid conflict between Boda-Boda groups.

Rallies conducted by presidential and parliamentary candidates with larger financial resources usually entail all or most of the four Boda-Boda activities. Others, including lower-level candidates, often have to limit their participation to the motorcade, as the most frequent action.

FIGURE 1 Boda-Boda riders spearheading a rally in Soroti, 2020. *Source*: Inachu Sarah.

4.2 | Rallying Boda-Boda mobility

Advertising, participation in the motorcade and transportation are multilocal and on-the-move activities that depend on motorised physical mobility. For advertising a rally, Boda-Bodas have to rely on their motorcycle and on their experience as taxi drivers to distribute information. They know how to attract attention and use local knowledge on where to find and engage the people interested in attending the rally. Furthermore, Boda-Bodas carrying a PA system are cheaper than lorries and are able to reach neighbourhoods and villages inaccessible by car. Both factors are crucial as rally-intensive campaigns require large investments in both labour and mobility (see Bowles et al., 2020; Paget, 2020).

As the motorcade is naturally a mobile event, supporters taking part in it have to be able to keep up with the moving car of the politician. Especially when time constraints force politicians to conduct several rallies a day, motorcades move quickly and require a motorised entourage. Compared to supporters ferried by bus or lorry, Boda-Bodas can not only move at the necessary speed, but also honk, cheer and perform stunts individually, granting them a high visibility. In case of a police roadblock or confrontation with rival sides, Boda-Bodas can easily disperse and reassemble, using side roads and footpaths (see also Cheeseman, 2021).

After the motorcade has reached its destination, the rally turns into a stationary event, whereby spectators assemble to listen to the entertainment and political messages. To reduce transportation costs and increase participation, politicians make use of Boda-Bodas to transport people to the rally venue. Compared to buses, they move independently and can carry individuals or small groups immediately and spontaneously, while continuing to advertise the rally and the politician.

To improve rallies, politicians use not only the physical mobility of Boda-Bodas but also the distinct ways they practise movements. By cheering, performing stunts and engaging with the people they transport, Boda-Boda riders greatly contribute to the perceived impact of a rally. 'If I come with my thousand Boda-Bodas all people will come out [...] to see, what is going on and taking place. Another one [comes], because we carry passengers, we keep on communicating. [...] Then one can change his heart. [...] So it has a big influence' (Boda-Boda leader, Kampala).

Beyond that, representations of Boda-Boda mobility further encourage the use of Boda-Bodas at political rallies. Being fast and available for providing mass transport, Boda-Bodas possess characteristics that mobilisers require in their agents (Paget, 2022, p. 224). Additionally, the reputation of Boda-Bodas as daredevil riders draws spectators to the motorcade. Finally, politicians and the electorate associate Boda-Boda participation in rallies with political success. 'The more

Boda-Bodas you have rallying the idea, the higher chances of winning the election you have' (Politician, eastern Uganda). This is important because canvassing in clientelist systems often aims at influencing discourses in order to make the candidate appear powerful and likely to win (Paget, 2019b, p. 461).

Although Boda-Bodas are widely seen as an effective and relatively cheap asset, mobilising large numbers still comes with significant costs as Boda-Bodas have to be compensated for the income they would have generated during the time they spent at the rally (Golooba-Mutebi, 2017, p. 4f.). Rallies of presidential and parliamentary candidates can include up to several hundred Boda-Bodas and hiring one rider usually costs between 10,000 and 30,000 UGX ($2.5–7.5) per event. These costs appear to favour wealthier and incumbent candidates (for Ghana, see Brierley & Nathan, 2022), who mostly belong to the ruling National Resistance Movement party. However, the fact that Boda-Bodas often demand less from opposition candidates ensures a more equal distribution of their mobilising potential.

To be mobilised for rallies, Boda-Bodas also need to be available and approachable. Their organisation is key to this. Therefore, it is not surprising that politicians stated that 'the Boda-Bodas are always more organised than these other market vendors and the like' (State official, northern Uganda). Such internal organisation mainly consists of stages and associations that act as moorings and organisational institutions but also act as contact points for mobilisers in search of activists. The Boda-Boda leadership thereby functions as an intermediary, similar to brokers in the works of Bowles et al. (2020) and Lockwood (2022). Being easily approachable, Boda-Boda leaders can quickly assemble the available riders of their stage or association. Although such structures can be reproduced by any other activist groups, the high 'mobility capital' (Kaufmann et al., 2004) remains as a distinct advantage of Boda-Boda riders.

5 | CONCLUSION

'Political mobilisation in sub-Saharan Africa is conducted with striking ingenuity' (Paget, 2019a, p. 16) and the incorporation of motorcycle taxis into rallies in Uganda is no exception. To understand the role of Boda-Bodas, we studied their participation through the lens of mobility. During rallies, Boda-Bodas perform various tasks that meet politicians' demand for visibility, transport and mobilisation. Thus, they effectively modernise the most important campaign activity in Uganda. In addition to physical mobility, representations of Boda-Boda mobility and specific mobile practices enable them to advertise, transport people and accompany motorcades. Our case study confirms that even a wider definition of mobility needs to be understood within the 'larger material and symbolic regimes' (D'Andrea et al., 2011, p. 158) that enable it. Such regimes include physical objectivities, subjective characteristics and related discourses. Objectivities can be infrastructures and vehicles but also institutions like traffic rules and unions, while subjectivities involve the characteristics, histories and positions of mobile individuals. We have shown that discourses are essential for creating representations of mobility and shaping mobile practice (Manderscheid, 2014, p. 192). Surrounding regimes therefore interact and decisively influence mobility, as they are major incubators for representations of mobility, mobile practice and thus physical movement.

Our research has further shown that the participation of large numbers of Boda-Boda riders impacts on how rallies are conducted in Uganda, transforming them from a stationary to a highly mobile event. However, their participation has also created a dependency on one group of activists. This has caused some lock-in effects for politicians to the point where it has become almost mandatory to hire Boda-Bodas for a successful rally. For the riders, being mobilised provides them with additional income but also leads to attempts to form party-affiliated Boda-Boda groups. Consequently, the political rally also serves as an example of how Boda-Boda mobility has effectively become politicised through a mobility/mobilisation nexus characterised by the increased mobility of campaign practices (Paget, 2020) and the large-scale mobilisation of mobile activists.

Thus, the mobility of a group contributes to their political versatility but also their likeliness to become mobilised. The existence of such a nexus within the Boda-Boda participation in rallies, however, hints at the need for further work on the impact of mobility on political processes in Africa. So far, mobility is rarely examined beyond its role in transportation in the context of political activism and campaigning. Hence, knowledge of its impacts on elections and patronage networks as well as public transport remains scarce.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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(Un)leashed potentials: an activist-centered perspective on the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern DRC

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ABSTRACT

The re-emergence of competitive elections in Africa has sparked new interest in political mobilization on the continent. Much of this literature focusses on political actors and the strategies they use to mobilize. If the campaign activists are reviewed at all, they are often categorized by their ethnic or religious affiliation. Thereby, abilities and potentials for political participation, which are important within conceptual literature on political mobilization, are side-lined. This article uses an activist-centered perspective to review the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers, eastern Congo. Based on empirical research in 2020 and 2021, it evaluates the mobilization potentials of the so-called motards and their deployment during political action. The article finds that motards possess unique potentials for participating in political campaigns due to their mobility and large social networks but only partially deploy them. While their mobility potential is widely utilized, the mobilization of their social networks is hampered by a lack of allegiances and infrequent contacts with politicians. Based on the research findings, the article advocates expanding the perception of political mobilization in Africa by reflecting on the preconditions of mobilizability such as enabling potentials, interactions with activists and aligned political strategies.

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Whenever an important politician visits Bukavu, the capital of Congo's South Kivu Province, he arrives at the airport and drives the final kilometers into town. His arrival will rarely go unnoticed however. Before the citizens can see the politician's car, they notice his convoy by the familiar sounds of the engines and horns of numerous motorcycles spearheading it. While the convoy passes, all traffic comes to a standstill and motorcyclists entertain the spectators with daring manoeuvres and deafening noise. Not long after however the same motorcycle taxi riders can be seen going about their usual taxi work through the resumed traffic.

Regular repetitions of this spectacle have made motorcyclist participation in political campaigns a common sight in Bukavu and Goma, the capital cities of the Kivu provinces. Whenever a rally, a motorcade or a protest takes place, the so-called 'motards' participate

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in the event as 'it is not uncommon for motorcycle taxi drivers […], to be mobilized by politicians for their campaigning in return for money'.[1] Despite their frequent engagement as political activists and numerous studies on motorcycle taxis in Africa[2] their role in political mobilization is not yet fully understood.[3] Although Titeca[4], Philipps and Kagoro[5] and Möller and Doevenspeck[6] have identified them as a significant political force in neighboring Uganda, the reasons and potentials for their political mobilization have so far received little attention. This affects the way in which motards, but also political campaigns in general are perceived. Since the focus of most publications lies on the mobilizing politicians, activists are often assigned the role of semi-passive targets of mobilization.[7] Hence, their efforts and characteristics are only recognized once they participate in political events.

This article adopts a new perspective on the political activism of motorcycle taxi riders in Eastern Congo and examines their abilities, mobilization and participations. Doing so it seeks to answer the questions: Which potentials for political mobilization do motards possess? How are these potentials mobilized? And what are the limits to their political mobilization?

Although motards have been mentioned as a politically important group[8], research on motorcyclist as political activists in Africa is limited. Furthermore, activists are believed to be mostly dormant in between elections[9] and are thus often neglected during this period. By providing an activist-centered perspective on political mobilization, this article aims to contribute to the general literature on political mobilization in Africa. Much of the conventional literature on political mobilization[10], including on North America[11], reviews mobilization by analyzing activists and their social origins. In contrast, most literature on Africa examines the phenomenon through the lens of the mobilizing political entity.[12] In cases where activist groups are analyzed, they are often defined by ethnicity or religion.[13] This contradicts the theoretical literature on political mobilization that identifies social networks[14] and mobility[15] as important attributes of potential activists. Although this does not mean that ethnicity and religion are irrelevant, this article argues that across ethnic and religious lines, activists stand out due to their ability to participate in political action. As neither attribute is distributed evenly amongst the members of an ethnic or religious group, research on political mobilization in Africa can be expanded by determining activists by their ability to participate in political mobilization.

In what follows, this study introduces motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern DRC. Building on empirical research conducted in Goma and Bukavu in 2020 and 2021, the article outlines the activist-centered perspective it uses to evaluate their political role and the factors that hamper their political mobilization.

Between a rock and a hard place, motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern DRC

Transportation remains a challenge in the Democratic Republic of Congo and its eastern Kivu provinces. The size of the country and natural barriers such as forests, hills and rivers complicate the construction of roads and railways. Furthermore, much of the existing infrastructure is currently in bad condition due to negligence and armed conflicts.[16] In response to growing mobility demands[17], citizens increasingly rely on motorcycle taxis called 'taxi moto' or simply 'moto' to meet their transportation needs.[18] The motorcycles

used, most of which are cheap but durable Indian and Chinese models[19], can carry up to three passengers or heavy loads. In the countryside, motos can access remote villages and pass muddy roads, while in cities they navigate heavy traffic and narrow alleys. Due to these advantages, the number of taxi drivers, or motards, has risen sharply in recent years. Current estimates assume that between 18.000[20] and 25.000[21] motards operate in Goma and Bukavu respectively. Hence, the motorcycle taxi sector has become a major employer in the region. An important characteristic of the sector are the low entry barriers. To become a motard, new riders require only the motorcycle itself, which is usually leased to them by local businessmen[22] and although a driving licence is legally required many riders operate without one. Working as a motards can be a profitable business[23] and riders who own their motorcycle can earn an above-average income of up to 500 USD a month. The low starting requirements and relatively high incomes make the sector attractive to people from diverse origins and levels of education.

Due to the background of many motards as demobilized combatants[24] and the frequent use of motorcycles for crime, motards are often associated with insecurity and violence. This contributes to the perception that working as a motard is suitable exclusively for young men[25] who are 'in waiting' for better jobs.[26] In contrast, for women even working in a motorcyclist association office is considered a peculiarity.[27]

Professional associations are the main organizational structure for motards and both Kivu provinces currently have more than ten mototaxi associations. Small associations sometimes only include a few dozen members while the largest have several thousand. They differ by their local regional or national scope, the services they offer and whether they are limited to motards. While ethnic divisions between associations were mentioned, motards claimed to also consider recommendations and the services provided as relevant for choosing an association. Some riders mentioned their preference for associations with minimal membership fees that mostly serve registration purposes and might offer assistance in case of police harassment. Others opted to join associations that also offered saving schemes, health insurance, or professional trainings. Associations usually have one office in each city to carry out registrations, trainings and meetings, while large associations sometimes maintain subsidiaries in different neighborhoods. However, they do not establish territorial exclusivity and especially in cities, several associations have overlapping areas of operation.

Regardless of their association, motards are a social group with a high degree of solidarity.[28] They assist their peers after accidents, share information on police checkpoints and collectively protest to defend their interests. Furthermore, motards are known for their keen interest in politics and their participation in party meetings and mobilizations.[29]

Research and data

The empirical data for this article was collected over four months in 2020 (1) and 2021 (3) in the eastern Congolese cities of Bukavu and Goma. Although motards are present throughout both Kivu provinces their concentration is the highest in the provincial capitals and most moto associations offices are located there. The cities are also political centers in which many parties maintain offices. However, due to conflict, North Kivu province was under military administration at the time of the research. Therefore, in

Goma, many politicians remained absent. In total 61 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews included motards and motó association leaders (28), and political actors (24) as well as journalists and civil society members (9) who served as controls. Motards were expected to have knowledge about their interactions with politicians and participation in political activities as well as their political allegiances. Since most riders participated in selected activities, only association leaders were included to obtain a more comprehensive overview on the mobilization of the sector. They coordinated different forms of political participation of association members and turned out be important gatekeepers for political mobilization. Politicians and campaign managers provided an overview of their mobilization strategies and the mobilization of motards. To add an informed external perspective, journalists and leaders of the civil society were included. The interview selection aimed at covering the diversity of each target group with the aim to attain an overview on the full spectrum of motard mobilizations. Amongst politicians, the research included politicians from different levels and parties as well as campaign managers, while association leaders were selected to cover as many associations as possible. Motards were first approached by hailing them as they passed central roundabouts. Later, snowballing was used to identify motards from neighborhoods and associations not yet represented. In Goma and Bukavu, respectively, a research assistant supported the arrangement of interviews and translated between Swahili or French and English although some interviews were conducted without an interpreter.

The interviews focussed on the general political involvement of motards and the different political activities they participated in during previous campaigns. Furthermore, allegiances and modes of mobilization were discussed. Additionally, the research included numerous casual talks with motards at their stands and during rides around the cities, and the observation of a protest of motards in front of the Governor's residence in Goma. Over the course, of the research motards showed unique abilities to carry out political action. Simultaneously, discrepancies between potentials and the most commonly executed political activities began to appear. This led to the gradual development of the activist centered perspective on mobilization over the course of the research.

An activist-centered perspective on political mobilization

Previous 'studies of political mobilization in sub-Saharan Africa have focussed primarily on the messages that parties impart to voters'.[30] Therefore, they mostly disregarded the campaign activists who are crucial for distributing the messages. To address this gap and to analyze motards in eastern DRC, this article uses an activist-centered approach to political mobilization. Instead of focusing on the goals and strategies of the mobilizing politicians, this perspective highlights the potentials of activists and the factors initiating their political participation. Thus, it asks: Why are motards able to participate in political activities and when do they opt to do so? Reviewing mobilization from the activists' point of view has several advantages. It highlights the expectations and aspirations of the mobilized instead of the usually emphasized goals of the mobilizer and thus offers a new perspective, especially for African settings. Additionally, it enables the identification and characterization of political activist groups based on their specific potentials and helps to understand the reasons for their participation.

To adopt an activist-centered perspective on political mobilization, the article uses the general incentives model[31] to identify mobilization potentials, activating contacts and political allegiances. It then reviews political participation as the result of political mobilization. Potentials for mobilization, also called resources[32], function as the political tool kit of a group and determine which activities it can conduct. They however provide no insight about actual politicization, mobilizations and actions.[33] Therefore, it is necessary to also consider political allegiance, which determines a group's identification with a particular side.[34] Potentials and allegiances can then be activated for political action through contacts between the activists and mobilizers. Activists experience such interactions differently from mobilizers, which makes it important to take their incentives into account. Once activated, potentials can lead to political action. This final part of the mobilization process, action also provides an opportunity to identify concealed potentials, allegiances and contacts.

Mobilization potentials

Politicians mobilize strategically[35] by screening social groups and evaluating their potential value for their campaigns.[36] This value or potential is defined here as the sum of characteristics that allow a group to execute campaign activities effectively. Contrary to Klanderman's and Oegema's, definition of potentials as the likeliness of participation[37] this article sees potentials as the theoretical ability to be mobilized for political action. Identifying potentials derives from political practice as a crucial element of political mobilization. Thereby potentials exceed the previously addressed context of information technology.[38] Potentials define a group's mobilizability. Groups that are rich in mobilization potential are able to participate in more and more diverse political activities than groups with little potential.[39] Furthermore, it also demarcates the limits of a group's mobilizability. A group that already deploys much of its potential might therefore not be able to respond to further mobilization attempts.[40] Knowledge of unused potential can thus help to develop future mobilizations and cause changes in political strategy. So far, mobility[41] and social networks[42] have been identified as mobilization potentials. It is therefore important to outline how these aspects contribute to a group's mobilizability.

Mobility

Political mobilization is inherently related to mobility. The term derives from 'making things mobile for political purposes'[43] and indicates that high mobility is the preferred state of political activists. Additionally, mobility is described as a 'technique of mobilization'[44], which often requires the provision of mobility in the form of individual movements, organized transportation or transport fares. This makes already mobile groups a preferred target for political mobilization.[45]

Human mobility is usually social in nature and can be defined as the interplay of physical movements, representations of mobility and mobile practices.[46] Each aspect thereby contributes to making mobility relevant for political mobilization. Physical movements are measurable and include speed, frequency and distances covered. They allow for the relocation and concentration of political forces and the evasion of countermeasures. Mobile practices address the ways of moving. Slow, aggressive, skillful or cautious

movements reflect the intentions and abilities of activists and determine their ability conduct certain campaign activities.[47] Representations of mobility then reflect on the discursive perceptions of certain mobilities. They can link mobilized movements to discourses like power and success.[48]

As contemporary campaigns become increasingly mobile, the costs of providing activists with mobility increase as well.[49] Hence, mobility constitutes a growing advantage that makes mobile groups more likely to be mobilized.[50] Mobility has also been recognized as an important feature for the creation and maintenance of social networks[51], which are themselves an important potential for mobilization.

Social networks

Conveying political messages and motivating people to participate in political activities are key objectives of mobilization.[52] Such messages can be communicated through mass media but most convincingly through personal contacts and social networks, which politicians can mobilize.[53] Both the extent and intensity of a social network affect its efficiency for political mobilization.[54] Strong personal connections are more likely to influence the recipient than fleeting encounters but are also more difficult to maintain. Because politicians cannot establish the necessary networks themselves[55], they have to rely on the social linkages of political activists[56] and recruit those with broad networks and strong ties to distribute their messages.[57] For activists social networks are a general capital[58] that can be used politically and thus also form a potential for the activism of a group.[59] Social networks are also important reasons for people to move. In turn, mobility enables encounters and the maintenance of social networks. Thus, the two potentials interact and often overlap.[60]

A group's mobilization potential is not static, however. Social networks can be expanded or disrupted and the mobility of a group can increase or decline. While the reasons for changes of the potentials are diverse political actors who seek to strengthen or weaken a particular group can be drivers of such processes.[61] Pre-existing ties between politicians and supporters can also make it preferable to improve their potentials[62] even if groups with larger potential exist. Examples of such behavior can be the provision of mobility through buses for supporters[63] or the discrediting of opposing groups to reduce their social networks.[64]

In general, most potentials are not mobilized. Important reasons for this is are the limited resources of political actors and the strategic nature of activist selection. While the full mobilization of groups would be highly resource intensive, groups with limited potentials might not be considered for political mobilization.[65] Furthermore, some groups are neglected, for strategic or ideological reasons, despite possessing relevant potentials.[66]

Moments of mobilization

Existing, mobilization potentials need to be activated to cause political action.[67] While numerous publications review mobilization strategies from the perspective of the mobilizing entity[68], activists are often reduced to more or less passive recipients of these strategies. However, when activists engage with political actors, they possess their own motivations and goals to acquire material political, social and emotional benefits.[69]

Furthermore, not all encounters are direct calls for action and might as well take place in everyday life, during religious meetings or the activity itself.[70] If successful, encounters can lead to political participation, increased potentials or stronger allegiance.[71] If unsuccessful however, the encounter can reduce potentials and allegiances, or fail to initiate participation.[72] In the worst case, it might even mobilize for political opponents.[73] Activists answer the call for participation, depending on their potentials but also allegiance and the perceived benefits. Hence, calls for action are most successful when the mobilized are potentially able to answer it and expect personal benefits.[74] Such benefits can include monetary handouts[75], the provision of transportation[76] or means of communication[77] amongst other things. These can also overlap when funds are provided as 'transport money'[78] or 'phone credit'.[79] Additionally, they can also entail the establishment of valuable contacts.[80] Furthermore, social gratification[81] can motivate activists with little allegiance towards the particular mobilizing entity.[82] For both sides, encounters are important to negotiate their respective goals, potentials and contributions. They are thus relevant for activating mobilization potentials, forming allegiance and initiating political action.[83]

The mobilized activist: allegiance and action

Allegiance and participation are used to measure activism and the effectiveness of mobilization[84] and are therefore crucial aspects of political mobilization. Allegiance[85], belonging[86], or efficacy[87] describes how strongly an individual or group sympathizes with a political side. While some scholars see allegiance as a potential for mobilization[88] this indicates a politician-centered view, as allegiance is a potential only from the perspective of the mobilizer. For activists, allegiance is relevant to determine their readiness to participate in political activities[89] within the extent of their available potential. If the level of allegiance is low, the mobilizing actor has to provide stronger stimuli to initiate participation.[90] Activist allegiance is often based on ethnic, religious, social or ideological foundations but can also be influenced through personal branding and political messages[91], as well as gifts and favors.[92] Stronger allegiances increase the readiness of activists to use their personal resources for political activities, as 'people with political efficacy are more likely to take an active part in politics'.[93] Thereby creating allegiance aims at reducing cost and increasing impact.[94]

Although participation is just the final manifestation of several elements of mobilization such as the activation of potentials and formation of allegiances[95], it is its most tangible aspect and can take diverse forms. Activists can cast their votes, participate in demonstrations, share information or advertise a political agenda. Actions are thereby ultimately dependent on the activists' potentials, the mobilizers' strategies and the surrounding conditions. Due to their visibility and impacts on the political distribution of power, political actions are the final goal of political mobilization.[96] Political actors adjust future mobilization efforts according to the success of previous actions[97], while activists consider participation depending on their personal benefits.[98] Although the success of their political side can be an important benefit for activists with strong allegiance,[99] in many cases the goals of the mobilizer and the mobilized activists do not overlap. This makes it relevant important to understand the aims of the mobilized activists in order to review their political participation.

Motorcyclists in eastern DRC: an activist group

In what follows, the activist-centered approach is applied to characterize the mobilization of motards in Goma and Bukavu. While motards are mentioned as a politically relevant group[100], they have not yet been reviewed in their role as activists. To do this, this section will identify their potentials, allegiances and contacts with political actors and review these against their engagement in political action.

Mobilization potentials of motards

Mobilization potentials determine a group's mobilizability. They can define activist groups and are therefore important in order to review motards as distinct activists. While mentions of their political participation indicate a relevant and coherent level of mobilizability[101], this chapter will examine the mobility and social network potentials of motards in order to determine how these potentials shape their political participation.

As taxi drivers, motards monetarize the provision of mobility by using their motorbikes. They are physically mobile and able to access any place in town within a short time. Their work also taught motards to ride a motorcycle skillfully through treacherous roads and heavy traffic. Furthermore, the mobility of motards is particularly high in relation to the mobility of the overall population. The lack of well-maintained roads and the traffic within the cities disadvantages not only those reliant on buses but also those in possession of cars. While movements and mobile practices already set motards apart from other potential activists, common discursive representations of their mobility further encourage their political mobilization.

> A student, […] can't be able to […] fight for social change, because he knows that he is in a risky category and he can be tracked and even be arrested and punished. But […] when he is in the category of motards, he knows, that this is a category recognised as a category of brutality, a category of trained fighters, a category of untouchable people.[102]

Motards are seen as a mobile and defiant group that differs from other politically active groups by their alleged impunity. Their speed and driving skills and thus the ability to avoid arrest, as well as the lack of registration, are important reasons for this. Therefore, discourses about motard mobility amongst politicians encourage the political participation of motards.

As mobility and social networks often influence each other, motards also owe parts of their networks to their mobile profession. Generally described as well connected, their networks consist of intra-motard ties, ties with customers, and private ties. Each category provides motards with certain advantages for political mobilization. Towards colleagues, motards share a strong sense of comradeship forged by the shared hardships on the road and joint hours of waiting for customers.[103] This solidarity becomes visible when motards defend each other against police harassment or while arguing with other road users in case of accidents.

> Motards sometimes protest against the police. For example in the case, that the motards are aware that you are arrested for nothing. […]. There will be a crowd of motards saying: 'You are not taking our colleague.'[104]

Furthermore, they are mandatory members of professional associations who constitute large networks with some consisting of thousands of riders. If necessary, associations are able to quickly mobilize their members to defend common interests. Every day, motards also interact with numerous customers of which some are regulars, while others are unknown to them. These constitute another network of strong and weak ties through which information is gathered and passed on.

> They are carrying people who cast their vote. And often these people don't have a candidate. And while going to vote the motard can ask them: Whom are you going to vote for? They say: I don't know. So the motards can whisper to them: You know, you should vote for X.[105]

Moreover, their private networks can also be used to forward political messages.

> We can make a direct sensitization of the people by influencing our families, influencing our networks and informing them that they have to vote for Kamerhe.[106]

The number and intensity of ties within the different networks make motards valuable to politicians since each network provides further possibilities for political mobilization.

The analysis of the mobility and social networks of motards therefore shows that they possess unique potentials as activists, which set them apart from other politically active groups. Unsurprisingly, many of them are closely related to their use of motorcycles. While ownership of their motorcycle or the common lack thereof could influence the readiness of motards to engage in political activities, it was mentioned only in relation to motorcycles owned or distributed by politicians, who were said to increase mobilizability.

Contacts

Although motards sometimes rally to pursue their own political goals, politicians incite much of their political participation. If a politician intends to get in touch with motards, he usually uses one of two options.

> He can go to the association and pay money […], so that the association supports him. Or he can select a few motards, and these motards can communicate to others.[107]

Most communication between motards and politicians is thus indirect and associated with the imminent call for action. Association offices function as contact points between riders and politicians as they are amongst the few moorings[108] within the mobile motorcycle taxi business. This gives association leaders privileged access to contacts with politicians, and it was mentioned that sometimes 'the political leader tries to manipulate the president or the leaders of those associations and gives them some representation in the political party.'[109] Association leaders thus experience more contacts that are also more direct. For most motards, on the other hand, contacts with politicians remain infrequent.

> When […] candidates are coming, the association will call us and they can put like one litre of fuel into the moto and if they will pay or not pay [money], we never know, because the association manager will not tell us the truth about what the candidates gave.[110]

This situation is reinforced by the fact that politicians often send assistants to mobilize, communicate or pay the motards.

Motards might encounter politicians in person only during the activities they perform for them. Most of these contacts are fleeting however and appear to do little to create new allegiances. Although many motards also regularly meet in front of party offices to discuss political news, politicians are usually not taking part in this activity. Therefore, such meetings might primarily create stronger networks amongst the motards and only to a lesser degree facilitate their party integration. In some instances, however, politicians reportedly met motards and distributed or let out motorbikes. These meetings seem to have succeeded in strengthening mobilization[111] potentials and political allegiances as a politician claimed that:

> For those who received a motorbike from a political leader, they now become loyal. After the campaign it remains a source of revenue for them so they are obliged to stay loyal because they are living from the revenue.[112]

In other cases, however, gift distribution did not succeed in creating allegiances and initiating political action. Several riders recalled incidents when Olive Lembe, the wife of former president Joseph Kabila, personally distributed gifts to the motards of Goma and Bukavu. However, most drivers continued to reject the FCC political coalition she promoted.

> Olive Lembe, she came and gave motards some kitenge [cloth] and 50,000 Francs [24 USD] but they didn't give her the votes.[113]

The ways in which motards interact with political actors do not differ much between the different cities and political levels. Neither in Goma nor in Bukavu did the shortage of direct and successful contacts prevent the overall mobilization of motards. The organizational structure of motards within associations enabled mobilizers to use the pre-existing professional networks of motard leaders for large-scale mobilizations. This was eased by the work of motards as hired transporters, which makes them receptive to spontaneous employment opportunities and one motard mentioned that:

> They [motards] do it for the candidate who pays them. Most of the times they are payed. But […] it is also possible to do that for the candidate which they support by vision or conviction.[114]

Allegiances

While many contacts between politicians and motards that aimed at creating allegiance were not successful, the continuous attempts of politicians to improve their reputation amongst the motards show that allegiances are still considered relevant. The expressed levels of allegiance varied strongly amongst the interviewed motards. While some did not support any political side and stated they would not participate political activities others had participated in campaigns despite their mistrust against politicians. For them, gifts and financial handouts were the most important reasons for their political participation: 'Despite no interest, if they promise us five liters of fuel, I find that that can help me in my activity.'[115] Other motards reported to have participated in the activities of different political sides, despite preferring one candidate. The examined associations consequently adjusted to the wish of their members to take part in as many activities as possible: 'We are ready to receive anyone in Goma. Cause' our association

is anti-politics. So, if you come, you're in this party or this party we have to receive you.'[116] All associations stated that they would be open to different political sides and mobilize their members as long as the riders accepted the offered facilitation and the promised payments were paid after the event. The failure to pay allowances and keep promises was in turn named as one of the main reasons for the lack of trust and allegiance towards politicians.

> If the politicians want to be loved. We need them to come and we talk with them and we tell them the difficulties. Then after telling the difficulties, in the former time, they lied to us.[117]

In those cases where motards showed allegiance towards politicians, ethnic and personal ties or personal political ambitions[118] were named the most important reasons to do so. In these cases, the closer social relationships might have ensured that both sides adhered to the relevant agreements. In Bukavu in particular, several motards expressed their strong support for individual politicians, especially the former presidential chief of staff, Vital Kamerhe. While some of these motards would still take part in the activities of other politicians if facilitated, others reported that they would exclusively support Kamerhe.

> Because I loved to support Vital Kamerhe so much […]. So, I went there. And I never supported any other candidate […]. He is a candidate and politician who used to talk to people in a very good way. He is very sociable and also he used to make people happy.[119]

While the candidate's charisma and character traits were mentioned to be important reasons for their allegiance, ethnic affiliations also facilitate the high level of allegiance between ethnic Shi motards and Vital Kamerhe. Their allegiance is also emphasized by the notion of several riders that they would not expect compensation for their participation in the activities of Kamerhe, as he is seen as trustworthy and committed to the welfare of his supporters.

> If they [Kamerhe's agents] want, they could reimburse us some money, if not, it is no problem. But we love him. He can't have the money for paying all the motards that support him.[120]

Such strong allegiances were however rather the exception than the rule. The allegiances of most motards were limited to few national level politicians while party allegiances remained almost absent. Therefore, other politicians hardly profit from the popularity of their party leaders and most candidates cannot expect an unpaid participation of motards in their activities. Due to this lack of allegiance and the participation of motards in political activities of different parties and candidates, most politicians perceive them as unreliable mercenaries.

> They are like prostitutes. They are like chameleons. […] Their political mobilization is manifold but their electoral attitude is not different from other electoral groups. […]. But, their specific role is, that they are present at the public manifestation of any politician.[121]

This perception leads to a reduced commitment of politicians towards establishing profession-based allegiances and causes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thereby the advantages of creating allegiances, such as reduced monetary expectations and positive reporting through social networks appear not to be worth the efforts.

Action

Motards possess high potentials for political mobilization, and are mobilized frequently by all political sides despite showing limited allegiances. They are also described as a group that is 'particularly susceptible to resorting to radical action'.[122] Based on the empirical data, this article identified five political activities that motards engaged in. These include motorcades, political violence, outreaches, advertising and transportation. The overwhelming majority of these activities thereby takes place during election campaigns.

Accompanying the motorcades of politicians is the main activity that motards participated in. When entering a city to hold rallies politicians apply this technique of mobilization to make their arrival known to the public. Motards usually meet the politician at the airport and escort him into town, whilst wearing his merchandise and honking to create the impression of a large support base.[123] To create more attention motards sometimes also execute daring stunts on their bikes.

> They can bring messages into the city in a few minutes. So, politicians look for them because of this visibility. [When] someone [was] applying for a chair in Rutshuru. He came to town, mobilized us and gave us flags […]. Then, we went from here to Rutshuru and there were more than 1000 motards.[124]

Depending on the candidate's funds and political level, between a few dozen and several hundred motards can take part in each motorcade. Because of their mobile nature, motorcades require supporters that are able to move quickly but are also visible to bystanders. This makes motards are preferred type of activists for this activity. It thereby utilizes the mobile potential of motards, which other activist groups do not possess. For riders as well as mobilizers the attendance, fuel consumption and duration of a motorcade is also easily to measure. This enables both sides to calculate and negotiate compensations. While, motorcades rely on the motards' mobile potential they only use intra-motard network potential for mobilization but do not tab into their private and customer networks.

Acts of political violence are another political activity that motards frequently engaged in. Although unsurprisingly few riders acknowledged their participation is was repeatedly mentioned by politicians and observers alike. Such violent activities included blockades, riots and attacks on supporters of opposing political sides. Especially outside of campaigns, participation in riots appeared to be the most frequent political activity of motards. When conducting violent activities, motards use their motorcycles to gather unexpectedly, execute their assault or blockade and retreat in order to avoid arrest. By using their mobility, they can determine the time and location of their action, which makes it difficult to counter them.

> They destroy the photos of other candidates. […]. The second aspect is physical violence. If there is a problem between two candidates, they can use motards to fight. And your power is determined by how many motards you have. They can even attack a candidate during a campaign. […]. Of course police is involved there with beating them and so on.[125]

> […] because there are times when we are running our motos in the caravan and people threw stones at us and maybe say: What a candidate, we don't like him. Even if he mobilized a lot of motards.[126]

On one occasion during the research, protesting motards were observed blocking the road in front of the Gouvernorat du Nord-Kivu in Goma. Shortly after they started to honk and shout, police officers on foot rushed out to arrest the motards and threatened to shoot at them. Before the police officers could reach the motards however, they drove away in a concerted effort and regrouped further down the road to continue their protest. Meanwhile the police officers attempted to pursue the protestors but gave up after the motards relocated a second time.[127] During such confrontations, internal cohesion and professional social networks propel motards in several ways. Through their networks, motards are able to inform their colleagues about a protest and call for support. During the action, their cohesion improves their ability to resist police or rival political sides collectively. In cased where a motard has been arrested, colleagues can organize protests to demand their release, which can also be negotiated by his association leader. The background of many motards as demobilized combatants and the hardships of their life on the road, have further let to representations of motards as a violent group.

> [We] motards are not well accepted in the society but more excluded because they think that we are swindlers, we are hooligans.[128]

Furthermore, politicians and NGOs mobilize motards to conduct outreaches to neighborhoods and villages that are inaccessible by car. While sometimes, the motards conduct these outreaches independently and distribute political information and gifts, in other instances they act under the coordination of a representative of the politician. Often, they also only participate in this activity as transporters of other activists.

> My task was to mobilize all the members of the community to vote for them. […]. As I was there I had the picture on my moto and we targeted some leaders in the community to vote for them.[129]

> I was campaigning for was a candidate from the county side. […] They could pay me 20$ per day and we would go from one village to another and so on during all the campaign.[130]

> We help candidates a lot, transporting them to make reach where vehicles can never reach.[131]

This illustrates the broad variability in the deployment of the group's mobilization potentials. Limited to transporters, motards use only their mobile potentials, while they also use their social networks, if actively advertising. For advertising purposes, motards are also used as moving billboards.

> Politicians post their cards on the motorbike and that is the way they advertise with motos. The moto, the engine itself, it is somehow neglected within the society, but it's a tool of communication that moves. It's not static. And it has a very important impact on the technical site of communication in our society.[132]

The frequent movements of motards throughout the cities make them visible to a broad audience, with particularly high exposure toward the customers a motard carries. This activity thus uses the mobile potential of motards but also profits from the ties between the riders and their customers.

> Motards […] are many in the city. They make it mostly for advertising. [Politicians] know, that motards are the ones who know all the city. They make it through the insecure and

> secure parts of the city, but the most important thing is that motards know how to speak to their customers.[133]

Motards and politicians also mentioned that direct advertising through the social networks of motards to be a distinct activity of motard mobilization. However, the success of this activity was seen as dependent on the motards' level of allegiance with the respective political side, which was often low. Thus, the strategy seldom actively deployed. This is probably due to difficulties in verifying the execution of the activity and measuring its success.

Finally, the voting behavior of motards was described as diverse and guided by ethnic and religious affiliations. A reason for this could be that activist groups are no longer acting nor treated as a separate category, if the group specific potentials are no longer relevant to the execution of a particular activity.

Conclusion

> When I was at my place alone […] I could not sensitize anyone because I was not known. But since I am a motard I have a lot of connections with the military, with police, with everyone and maybe we transport some MPs sometimes. When we go into the mobilizations of politicians, we get a lot of contacts from them. So that's the advantage of having a motorcycle.[134]

This article reviewed the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers, called motards, in two major cities of eastern DRC from an activist-centered perspective. First, it evaluated their mobilization potentials and found that motards are highly mobile and possess extensive social networks, which can facilitate political participation. Contacts and allegiances are generally regarded as important preconditions of political mobilization as well. However, motards rarely interacted with politicians directly and showed little allegiance towards most of them. Instead, professional motorcyclist associations facilitated mobilizations and acted as intermediaries between the motards and politicians. The interplay of high potentials and limited allegiances affected the forms of political activities that motards executed on behalf of political actors.

While their potentials enabled them to be prolific activists, their mobilization was limited by a mutual lack of trust between motards and politicians. As most mobilizations were transactional, motards primarily engaged in activities in which their participation was visible and could be compensated. In doing so, they attempted to minimize their own contribution and the risk of making a loss when pausing their work for a political activity. Likewise, politicians preferably mobilized motards for activities, in which they could confirm their participation. Mobilizations for motorcades and transportation, but also for violent action were clearly visible and thus constituted a large share of the activities that motards executed. Consequently, independent activities that are difficult to measure and require trust, such as advertising to customers or autonomous outreaches were rarely used. Thereby activities that utilize the mobility of motards appear to have been favored as distances and fuel consumption are measurable. In contrast, the use of social networks is harder to evaluate and was therefore usually not facilitated by politicians. However, due to the limited allegiances motards are often not willing to use their networks on behalf of politicians without receiving direct benefits. The lack of

mutual trust and an uncertain reciprocity of these forms of activism thus leave large parts of the social network potential of motards unused.[135]

Analysis of the empirical data showed that motards in eastern Congo are able to execute various political activities due to their high mobilization potentials. Currently however some potentials remain unused as a result of a lack of direct contacts and allegiances between the motards and political actors. Politicians mentioned that they are aware of the unused potentials and intend to create stronger ties to mobilize motards more effectively. However, allegiance building and increased mobilization will require the use of additional resources. This could make campaigns increasingly more expensive, as has been the case in other African settings.[136] If successful, politicians might be able use increased allegiance to incite motards to contribute their own resources towards political activities and thus widen their resource pool. Therefore, untapped potentials can set the frame for the development of new mobilization strategies.

Notes

1. van Acker, Vlassenroot, and Musamba, "Returning to Society," 6.
2. c.f. for this journal: Oldenburg, "Agency, Social Space and Conflict-urbanism in Eastern Congo"; Ehebrecht, Heinrichs, and Lenz, "Motorcycle-taxis in Sub-Saharan Africa"
3. c.f. Diaz Olvera, Plat, and Pochet, "Looking for the Obvious," 2.
4. Titeca, "The Commercialization of Uganda's 2011 Election in the Urban Informal Economy".
5. Philipps and Kagoro, "The Metastable City and the Politics of Crystallisation".
6. Möller and Doevenspeck, "The Fast and the Victorious".
7. Paget, "Election Campaigns and Political Mobilization in Africa," 1; c.f. Lockwood, "Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization"; Molm, Schaefer, and Collett, "The Value of Reciprocity".
8. Oldenburg, "Agency, Social Space and Conflict-urbanism in Eastern Congo".
9. Bob-Milliar, "Political Party Activism in Ghana," 680.
10. e.g. Abramson and Claggett, "Recruitment and Political Participation"; Strömblad and Myrberg, "Urban Inequality and Political Recruitment"; Gerber and Green, "Field Experiments on Voter Mobilization".
11. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*; Kershaw, "Mobilizing the Mobilized".
12. e.g. Lockwood, Krönke, and Mattes, "Party Structures and Organization Building in Africa"; Cheeseman and Hinfelaar, "Parties, Platforms, and Political Mobilization"; Paget, "Election Campaigns and Political Mobilization in Africa".
13. Koter, "Africa and Ethnic Politics"; Nathan, "Local Ethnic Geography, Expectations of Favoritism, and Voting in Urban Ghana"; McCauley, "The Political Mobilization of Ethnic and Religious Identities in Africa".
14. Cox, Rosenbluth, and Thies, "Mobilization, Social Networks, and Turnout"; Skoric, Ying, and Ng, "Bowling Online, Not Alone".
15. Sopranzetti, "Owners of the Map".
16. Munyaka and Yadavalli, "Using Transportation Problem in Humanitarian Supply Chain to Prepositioned Facility Locations," 206.
17. Kumar, *Understanding the Emerging Role of Motorcycles in African Cities*, 16.
18. Kikangala Ntambwe et al., "Profil et appreciation du metier de conducteur de mototaxis (motard) a Kabinda, Republique Democratique du Congo," 26.
19. Carayannis and Pangburn, "Home is Where the Heart is," 710.
20. Interview: Registration officer Bukavu (28821MYKBu).
21. Interview: Motard leader Goma (17821KKLGo).

22. Verweijen, *The Ambiguity of Militarization*, 163.
23. c.f. Diaz Olvera et al., "Earning a Living, But at What Price?," 169.
24. van Acker, Vlassenroot, and Musamba, "Returning to Society," 7; Carayannis and Pangburn, "Home is Where the Heart is".
25. Kikangala Ntambwe et al., "Profil et appreciation du metier de conducteur de mototaxis (motard) a Kabinda, Republique Democratique du Congo," 33.
26. Oldenburg, "Dead End?" 67.
27. Interview: Association secretary Goma (25821RKGo).
28. Oldenburg, "Dead End?" 78.
29. van Acker, Vlassenroot, and Musamba, "Returning to Society," 5; Oldenburg, "Agency, Social Space and Conflict-urbanism in Eastern Congo," 267f.
30. Paget, "Election Campaigns and Political Mobilization in Africa," 2.
31. Gallagher et al., "Explaining Activism Amongst Fine Gael Members"; Bob-Milliar, "Political Party Activism in Ghana"; Whiteley and Seyd, *High-intensity Participation*.
32. Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, "Prospecting for Participants," 154.
33. Gershtenson, "Mobilization Strategies of the Democrats and Republicans, 1956–2000," 293.
34. c.f. Moskalenko and McCauley, "Measuring Political Mobilization," 243.
35. Abramson and Claggett, "Recruitment and Political Participation," 907.
36. Kershaw, "Mobilizing the Mobilized," 426; Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, "Prospecting for Participants," 154.
37. Klandermans and Oegema, "Potentials, Networks, Motivations, and Barriers," 519.
38. Mutsvairo, *Digital Activism in the Social Media Era*, 5; Manacorda and Tesei, "Liberation Technology," 533.
39. c.f. Krueger, "A Comparison of Conventional and Internet Political Mobilization," 772; Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 16.
40. Gershtenson, "Mobilization Strategies of the Democrats and Republicans, 1956–2000," 294.
41. Sopranzetti, "Owners of the Map," 139.
42. Kershaw, "Mobilizing the Mobilized," 426; Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog," 129.
43. c.f. Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 11.
44. Sopranzetti, "Owners of the Map," 123.
45. c.f. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 30f.
46. c.f. Sheller and Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm"; Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," 17–31.
47. c.f. Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," 19.
48. Manderscheid, "Mobile Ungleichheiten".
49. Paget, "Campaign Modernization without Mediatization," 1.
50. Sopranzetti, "Owners of the Map," 136; Titeca, "The Commercialization of Uganda's 2011 Election in the Urban Informal Economy," 203.
51. Manderscheid, "Mobilität," 557.
52. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 26.
53. Cox, Rosenbluth and Thies, "Mobilization, Social Networks, and Turnout," 448.
54. Cox, Rosenbluth and Thies, "Mobilization, Social Networks, and Turnout".
55. Lockwood, "Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization," 630.
56. Wielhouwer, "The Mobilization of Campaign Activists by the Party Canvass," 178; Cowburn, "The Transformation of the Congressional Primary," 110.
57. Samuels and Zucco, "Crafting Mass Partisanship at the Grass Roots," 773; Green and Schwam-Baird, "Mobilization, Participation, and American Democracy," 5.
58. Skoric, Ying, and Ng, "Bowling Online, Not Alone," 416.
59. Klandermans and Oegema, "Potentials, Networks, Motivations, and Barriers," 2; Corning and Myers, "Individual Orientation Toward Engagement in Social Action," 708.
60. Urry, "Social Networks, Mobile Lives and Social Inequalities," 24.
61. c.f. Freyburg and Garbe, "Blocking the Bottleneck".
62. Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck, "Increasing Inequality," 286.

63. c.f. Blattman et al., "Eat Widely, Vote Wisely?," 8; Koter, "Costly Electoral Campaigns and the Changing Composition and Quality of Parliament," 576.
64. Koter, "Africa and Ethnic Politics," 247; Osa and Schock, "A Long, Hard Slog".
65. Karp and Banducci, "Party Mobilization and Political Participation in New and Old Democracies," 218; Kershaw, "Mobilizing the Mobilized," 426.
66. Karp and Banducci, "Party Mobilization and Political Participation in New and Old Democracies," 219.
67. Ibid., 229.
68. Kershaw, "Mobilizing the Mobilized"; Huckfeldt and Sprague, "Political Parties and Electoral Mobilization"; Gershtenson, "Mobilization Strategies of the Democrats and Republicans, 1956–2000"; Karp and Banducci, "Party Mobilization and Political Participation in New and Old Democracies".
69. Whiteley and Seyd, *High-intensity Participation*, 51f.
70. c.f. Lockwood, "Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization".
71. Karp and Banducci, "Party Mobilization and Political Participation in New and Old Democracies," 229.
72. Peiris, "Examining Party Allegiance," 184.
73. Goldstein and Ridout, "The Politics of Participation," 22.
74. Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland, "Transparency, Protest, and Autocratic Instability," 766.
75. Bob-Milliar, "Place and Party Organizations"; Rasmussen and van Stapele, "Our Time to Recover," 727.
76. Bowles, Larreguy, and Liu, "How Weakly Institutionalized Parties Monitor Brokers in Developing Democracies," 953.
77. Lockwood, "Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization," 640.
78. Golooba-Mutebi, "The Cost of Politics in Uganda," 5.
79. Lockwood, "Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization," 640.
80. c.f. Wielhouwer, "The Mobilization of Campaign Activists By the Party Canvass," 179.
81. Ibid.
82. Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck, "Increasing Inequality," 284.
83. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 25ff.
84. Moskalenko and McCauley, "Measuring Political Mobilization"; Corning and Myers, "Individual Orientation Towards Engagement in Social Action".
85. Peiris, "Examining Party Allegiance," 640.
86. McCauley, "The Political Mobilization of Ethnic and Religious Identities in Africa," 801.
87. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 15; Whiteley and Seyd, *High-intensity Participation*, 65.
88. e.g. Gershtenson, "Mobilization Strategies of the Democrats and Republicans, 1956–2000," 293.
89. Corning and Myers, "Individual Orientation Toward Engagement in Social Action," 706.
90. Whiteley and Seyd, *High-intensity Participation*, 55.
91. c.f. Paget, "Lone Organizers: Opposition Party-building in Hostile Places in Tanzania," 223.
92. Fjelde and Höglund, "Electoral Institutions and Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," 301; Vokes, "Primaries, Patronage, and Political Personalities in South-western Uganda".
93. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*.
94. c.f. Wielhouwer, "The Mobilization of Campaign Activists By the Party Canvass," 180.
95. Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 11.
96. Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, 26.
97. Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck, "Increasing Inequality".
98. Johnston and Pattie, "Representative Democracy and Electoral Geography," 338.
99. Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland, "Transparency, Protest, and Autocratic Instability," 769.
100. e.g. Aimé and Alexis, "Des Conditions D'Exercice du Transport Par Taxi-Motos Dans la Ville de Lubumbashi," 251.
101. e.g. Oldenburg, "Agency, Social Space and Conflict-urbanism in Eastern Congo," 266.
102. Interview: Politician Bukavu (10921AMBu).
103. Oldenburg, "Maisha ni kuvumiliya," 43.

104. Interview: Motard Goma (18821PXGo).
105. Interview: Motard leader Goma (25821KLGo).
106. Interview: Motard Bukavu (12921XXBu).
107. Interview: Motard Bukavu (11921KABu).
108. c.f. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry, "Editorial".
109. Interview: Journalist Bukavu (11921BSBu).
110. Interview: Motard Goma (160821LHGo).
111. c.f. Trapido, "Masterless Men," 204.
112. Interview: Politician Bukavu (6921EHBu).
113. Interview: Motard leader Goma (21821KMGo).
114. Interview: Motard Bukavu (11921KABu).
115. Interview: Motard Goma (17821AAGo).
116. Interview: Motard leader Goma (7821COGo).
117. Interview: Motard leader Goma (7821COGo).
118. c.f. Whiteley and Seyd, *High-intensity Participation*, 83.
119. Interview: Motard Bukavu (12921XXBu).
120. Interview: Motard Bukavu (12921XXBu).
121. Interview: Politician Bukavu (6921EHBu).
122. Verweijen, "The Ambiguity of Militarization," 204.
123. c.f. Aimé and Alexis, "Des Conditions D'Exercice du Transport Par Taxi-Motos Dans la Ville de Lubumbashi," 251.
124. Interview: Motard Goma (17821FSGo).
125. Interview: Politician Bukavu (6921EHBu).
126. Interview: Motard Goma (16821KEGo).
127. Observation: 14.09.2021 Goma, Avenue de la Paix.
128. Interview: Motard Bukavu (11921KABu).
129. Interview: Motard Goma (14821BNGo).
130. Interview: Motard Goma (16821TJGo).
131. Interview: Motard Bukavu (11921KABu).
132. Interview: Politician Goma (11821WLGo).
133. Interview: Motard Goma (11821SLGo).
134. Interview: Motard Goma (14821BNGo).
135. Molm, Schaefer, and Collett, "The Value of Reciprocity," 212.
136. Paget, "Campaign Modernization without Mediatization," 5; Golooba-Mutebi, "The Cost of Politics in Uganda," 5.

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Publication III.

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Boda-Boda Pakalast: Mobility and the Politics of Informal Public Transport in Uganda

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Abstract:

The objective of this article is to address mobility as a crucial element in enabling transport workers to influence the politics of public transport in Uganda. It examines how the mobile capabilities of informal motorcycle taxi drivers empower them to withstand formalization and expulsion attempts by state institutions. Considering the specific conditions of informal transport in Uganda, the article identifies four mobility-driven strategies through which the so-called 'Boda-Boda' riders actively or passively influence the politics of informal public transport. By using strategies such as protests, evasions, self-organization, and political embeddedness, they advocate their professional interests and protect their informality. For these strategies, Boda-Boda riders rely on their motorcycle-powered mobility to either confront the state or evade it if necessary. While remaining outside the law Boda-Bodas do cooperate with various state institutions and often lend their mobility to political actors. In the process, they have become indispensable elements of the political and economic systems of the county. Contrary to some depictions of informal transporters as mere recipients of urban planning the article thus advocates for considering them as active and influential participants within policymaking processes.

Keywords:

Informal Transport, Uganda, Motorcycle Taxis, Boda Boda, Mobility, Transport politics

1. Introduction

Every day, traffic flows sweep countless workers in and out of Kampala, Uganda's political and economic heart. However, many of the city's vital road arteries were constructed decades ago, when the city had less than a third of today's population (Goodfellow and Mukwaya 2021, 6f). Due to their frequent clogging, many citizens rely on agile motorcycle taxis, called Boda-Bodas, to make it through the traffic jams. Although these "quick fixes" are in high demand they are also seen as "cancerous" (Interview Kizza Besigye (213KKB)) due to the rapid increase in numbers and their involvement in violent riots and crime. The Janus-faced nature of Boda-Bodas has made them a controversial form of transport (Daily Monitor 2022b; New Vision 2021) and many Ugandans are caught between the fear of accidents and a dependency on this form of transport. Despite their drawbacks Boda-Boda transport appears to remain *pakalast,* meaning forever, in Luganda (Wilkins 2016, 634).

The negative externalities of Boda-Boda transport are often attributed to their informality which refers to a mostly unregulated and untaxed but publicly accessible mode of operations (Ehebrecht, Heinrichs, and Lenz 2018, 446). Allegedly, the lack of management allows riders to ignore traffic rules, rob customers and occupy public areas with impunity (Wanume et al., 2019, p. 10). Informality is thereby mostly attributed to the incapacity of states to regulate transport operations (Cervero and Golub 2007, 446). In this power vacuum "the informal economy has become a sphere of intense political competition" (Lindell 2010, 3) and non-state stakeholders such as investors, crime syndicates and politicians also contest the politics of

informal transport (Kumar 2011, 5). In contrast, those working in the sector, as taxi drivers, touts or conductors, are often seen as economically and politically weak (c.f. Cervero and Golub 2007, 446) and unable to influence political decisions. Boda-Boda riders in Uganda however appear to contradict the assumption. In comparison to other road users, they possess powerful mobilities which increase the demand for them, incite fear in other road users and enable them to play a crucial role in election campaigns (Möller and Doevenspeck 2023). This article consequently asks why Boda-Boda motorcycle taxi drivers are more mobile than other transporters and how they use this mobility to defend their political interests. Based on empirical research in Uganda, it investigates how transport workers are able to contest the politics of informal public transport. Therefore it considers informal transport as a system which is not defined by "chaos" (Ndibatya, Booysen, and Coetzee 2016, 329) and a lack of state control but by continuous renegotiations of the regulatory framework between the state, non-state actors (Ehebrecht, Heinrichs, and Lenz 2018, 250) and society (Roca and Simabuko 2020, 376). By examining mobility as an empowering asset of informal transport workers, this article also aims to expand on the works of Ezeibe et al. (2017) and Agbiboa (2019c) on characterizing the role of informal transport workers in Africa. To do so, it first discusses the persistence of informal transport systems in Africa and Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis in Uganda. This provides the basis for an analysis of their mobility, which is then applied to review the strategies Boda-Bodas deploy to influence the politics of transport.

2. The politics of informal public transport

Amidst the complex dynamics of African cities, governing public transport has become a crucial aspect of political debates and development schemes (Kumar and Barrett 2008; Porter 2016; Sietchiping, Permezel, and Ngomsi 2012). Assessments of the informal transport sectors thereby range from describing the systems as dysfunctional (Kumar and Barrett 2008, ix) to describing them as a temporary stopgap (Ehebrecht 2020, 253) or highlighting the skills and flexibility of informal transporters (Oldenburg 2019, 75).

In general, the persistent informality of transport providers is attributed to a lack of state effectiveness (Goodfellow 2015), whereby authorities cannot satisfy the transport demands of the population (Tun et al. 2020, 4). In many cases, informal operators emerged in response to the demise of state-owned transport companies, the liberalization of the sector (Ehebrecht 2020, 24) or a general disintegration of state institutions (Daniel, Lauth, and Rothfuß 2023, 276). However, several countries, such as Tanzania (c.f. Ehebrecht 2020) or South Africa (c.f. Booysen, Andersen, and Zeeman 2013), in which informal public transport is common, are politically stable and able to exert control over other economic sectors. Additionally, pressure of labour unions and passengers can also make formalization an unpopular agenda (Agbiboa 2019c, 2–4). An informal public transport sector is still far from being ungoverned (Durant et al. 2023, 7). Even in dysfunctional regimes, such as Zaire in the late 1980s (Kelvin 2000, 34), some state or non-state actors exert significant influence on it. While in Zaire transporters were controlled through taxes on spare parts, states can also influence the infrastructural

setting or enter negotiations with informal operators (Heinze 2019, 7). Alternatively, parallel power structures, such as militias or parties, have been used to govern public transport (Doherty 2022, 248; Heinze 2019, 7). Non-state actors, like stakeholder associations, business people, or organized crime syndicates (Agbiboa 2019a, 3; Heinze 2019, 9; Verweijen 2015, 138) can also exert regulatory influence on informal transport in Africa. Their influence often improves the organization of operations but rarely benefits customers nor other road users, who continue to suffer from the disadvantages of informal public transport, such as unstable pricing, lack of road safety and unequal access.

In this contested setting, informal transporters are involved in different types of crime (Márquez, Pico, and Cantillo 2018, 7) such as theft, extortion, murder, and terrorism (c.f. Spooner, Mwanika, and Manga 2020, 52). The extent, to which informal transporters are involved in crime also depends on the character of the dominant stakeholders. While trade unions might attempt to mitigate crime to legitimize themselves, syndicates often use violence to secure their influence. Furthermore, authoritarian or hybrid regimes can use informal transporters to carry out "dirty work" in the form of political violence (Oldenburg 2018, 266f).

Such a use of informal transporters by states usually contradicts the desire of some state institutions to formalize and regulate them. Authorities to whom transporters would provide a tax base, or whose tasks of managing public transport is impeded by informal operators are likely to push for formalization and thereby antagonize stakeholders that profit from

informality (Bocarejo and Urrego 2022, 2; Tun et al. 2020, 28). However, the persistence of informal transport systems illustrates the difficulties of this endeavour. If citizens rely on informal transport, any limitation can cause economic and potential political backlash (Márquez, Pico, and Cantillo 2018, 7). Despite being seen as marginalized, poor and politically weak (Cervero and Golub 2007, 446), transport workers themselves will often also resist formalization as they fear reduced incomes and unemployment (c.f. Ingle 2009). Because they constitute a large labour reservoir, (Heinze 2019, 4), limiting informal transport also raises concerns about a possible increase of crime, unemployment (Agbiboa 2019b, 3) or civil unrest (Doherty 2022, 247). In several African countries, transport workers are also an important but often volatile voting bloc and politicians might be afraid of losing their support (Amone 2021, 4). Furthermore, their movements make controlling transporters difficult and resource-intensive and the often-violent character attributed to informal transport workers can further discourage regulation attempts (Heinze 2019, 8). At the same time, transport workers can attempt to use compliance to make formalization appear less necessary or profitable and, in some areas, they have established mechanisms of self-control, and good conduct (Ezeibe et al. 2017, 267).

3. Boda-Boda Uganda

In Uganda, public transport is divided into inter-urban, urban and rural transport. Inter-urban transport is served by buses and minibuses (Kamuhanda and Schmidt 2009, 132), while urban

transport relies on shared minibus-taxis and motorcycle taxis called Boda-Bodas (Kumar and Barrett 2008, 14). Rural transport is served by motorcycle and bicycle Boda-Bodas as well as smaller shared taxis (Kamuhanda and Schmidt 2009, 133). Transport providers are almost exclusively private after state-owned companies collapsed in the 1970s and 1980s (Goodfellow and Mukwaya 2021, 10). As infrastructures never caught up with the growing population, problems in road maintenance have aggravated the situation (Daily Monitor 2023). In this setting, the almost exclusively male transport workers (c.f. Mukwaya et al. 2022, 32) face harsh working conditions, including accidents, air pollution, and long working hours (Kumar and Barrett 2008, 19). While bus operations are largely formalized, shared minibus taxis and Boda-Bodas mostly operate informally and often without driving permits, road-worthiness checks or taxation (Tumwesigye, Atuyambe, and Kobusingye 2016, 15). Boda-Bodas differ from shared taxis "in size, route, function, organisation and market" (Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018, 675) and provide fast individual transport beyond the routes of taxis or buses (Tumwesigye, Atuyambe, and Kobusingye 2016, 3). Due to the importance of the motorbike for the riders, the term Boda-Boda or Boda can refer to a motorcycle taxi service, the driver, and the motorbike itself. Although they are more costly than shared taxis (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 28), Boda-Bodas are used by most Ugandans. This excludes only the poorest, who cannot afford them, and the wealthy, who prefer the safety of private cars. Originating from cross-border bicycle taxi services between Uganda and Kenya (Howe and Bradbury 2002, 2), Boda-Boda numbers have increased rapidly since the 1990s, when cheap motorcycles became available (Doherty 2017, 195) and today, motorcycles have

widely replaced their bicycle predecessors (Muni et al. 2020, 5). Of all forms of public transport, the Boda-Boda sector also employs by far the highest numbers. Publications (Doherty 2022, 242; Mallett et al. 2022, 2) and interviews suggest that at least 250,000 Boda-Bodas operate in and around Kampala. This would mean that the Boda-Boda sector employs almost 10% of the population in the area. Although estimations drop to around 5% in other parts of the country, Boda-Boda has become the second most important employment opportunity after agriculture (Amone 2021, 8). Boda-Bodas are fast, can transport up to three persons or heavy goods, and are widely available. They are in high demand due to their ability to access remote villages as well as heavy traffic areas. However, Boda-Boda riders often lack licences or safety equipment and fatal accidents are frequent (Wanume et al. 2019, 2). They also routinely violate traffic regulations and thus endanger pedestrians and other road users. Because Boda-Bodas mostly operate without registration (Tumwesigye, Atuyambe, and Kobusingye 2016, 15), criminals also easily intermingle with regular riders (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 58).

"They are just building individual mobility and their best users are the thieves. […]. They might not be thieves themselves but the thieves […] are using them very efficiently because they are not tracked, […], and they are also being used by assassins because it's easy to get away" (Interview Saalamu Musumba, Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) vice-chairperson (223KSM)).

Thus riders are perceived as belonging to an “underclass of rogues” (Goodfellow 2015, 128) and feared for their alleged violent behaviour (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 57). Due to these externalities, the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) has repeatedly but unsuccessfully proposed bans on Boda-Bodas in the city centre (Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018, 684).

Regardless of their informality, Boda-Bodas are well organized. Riders that share a parking space, the so-called “stage”, elect a chairman who protects their interests and represents them at local or regional Boda-Boda associations. The stage often also provides its members with savings and loans groups, or financial assistance in case of accidents, while associations solve disputes between stages and function as the political representation of their members (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 36).

4. The Powers of Boda-Boda Mobility

Although many publications on Boda-Bodas (c.f. Diaz Olvera, Plat, and Pochet 2020) address transport-related issues and often feature transport in their title (e.g. Howe and Davis 2002; Raynor 2014; Wanume et al. 2019), the mobility of Boda-Bodas is not characterised. While providing transport services is important to “Boda mobility” (Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018, 677), concepts of mobility extend beyond this and include the broader conditions and social expressions of tempo-spatial relocation (Sheller 2014). As such, they entail the materialities of physical movements as well as mobile practices and the symbolic and discursive representations of mobility (Cresswell 2010, 18). For motorcycle taxis, physical

mobility includes speed, distances, rhythms and routes while the broader materialities also include road conditions, parking spaces and traffic jams (Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018, 677). Mobile practices refer to the technical execution of movements but also to the ways in which they are experienced (Cresswell 2010, 20). For Boda-Bodas this can be their distinctive way of riding a motorbike through traffic or on narrow tracks (Howe and Davis 2002, 2), as well as their robust behaviour towards other road users (Goodfellow 2015, 139). Feelings they experienced during their rides can thereby differ and range from freedom (Oldenburg 2019, 75) to vulnerability and exclusion (Öbom 2020). Representations then reflect on the embeddedness of movements into society. This includes their self-perception as youths who are in-between jobs (c.f. Amone 2021, 3) and riding their motorbike for survival. Other representations are based on external narratives that depict Boda-Boda riders as the only way to reach a destination in time (Goodfellow and Mukwaya 2021, 1), as criminals and outlaws (Doherty 2022, 242) or as an important political force (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). Representations of mobility influence the ways customers, state officials and other road users interact with Boda-Bodas and thus their movements and mobile practices. Applying a mobility lens shows that Boda-Bodas can move fast, possess unique driving skills and are surrounded by propelling discourses of convenience, brutality and power and helps to distinguish Boda mobility from the mobility of shared taxis, or private cars. While the latter cover similar or greater distances, they lack the ability to slip through traffic and transport people individually. Due to these advantages, Boda-Bodas can be considered to be highly

mobile. The mobility lens makes it possible to extend research on Boda-Bodas beyond transportation.

With the "mobilities turn" (Sheller and Urry 2016, 16), power relations originating from unequal access to mobility have become a major concern of mobility studies. Consequently, mobility is referred to as one of the most important questions of territorial regimes (Bærenholdt 2008, 8). Reviewing mobility-fuelled power relations is particularly relevant for Boda-Bodas as the group is not only mobile but also of strategic value to politicians in Uganda (c.f. Goodfellow and Titeca 2012). Boda mobility becomes powerful by enabling the riders to relocate and create social networks (Bradbury 2006, 79; Manderscheid 2014, 189). While being present at certain points in time allows them to seize political, social and economic opportunity (Urry 2012, 27), being absent helps to avoid negative localized effects. Furthermore social networks are considered social and political capital themselves (Bradbury 2006).

Limited transport infrastructures further empower Boda-Boda riders. The lack of highways and railway lines makes their ability to bypass traffic and use unpaved tracks indispensable. This absence of alternatives also strengthens their political bargaining power (c.f. Adey 2006, 90f). Aware of this, the state seeks to govern Boda-Boda mobilities, through checkpoints, curfews and subsidies and tries to maintain authority over the symbolic meanings of Boda mobility (c.f. Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013, 194). It promotes Boda-Bodas as hard-working job creators and attempts to defend them against accusations of misconduct and lawlessness

(Daily Monitor 2022a). The case of Uganda however also shows that the effectiveness of mobility regimes depends on the institutional power to enforce them (c.f. Daniel, Lauth, and Rothfuß 2023, 273; Kamuhanda and Schmidt 2009, 141). As in other informal public transport systems, non-state actors such as investors, professional associations and opposition politicians are able to wield considerable influence on the Boda-Boda sector and sometimes clash with state authorities that attempt to either impose formalization or use informal methods to govern mobility (c.f. Muchadenyika 2019, 1). Different stakeholders thereby use different strategies, ranging from lobbying, and cooperation (Ehebrecht 2020, 145f) to subversive strategies such as crime and protest that antagonize the state (c.f. Cohen, Cohen, and Li 2017). The informality of this mobile and potentially powerful group thus makes control over Boda-Bodas subject to constant renegotiations (c.f. Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018, 684).

5. Sampling Strategy

The empirical data for this article was collected during three research periods in Uganda between 2018 and 2022. While most research on Boda-Bodas is concentrated in Kampala (c.f. Evans, O'Brien, and Ch Ng 2018; Mallett et al. 2022; Muni et al. 2020; Raynor 2014; Tumwesigye, Atuyambe, and Kobusingye 2016; Wanume et al. 2019), this study includes urban (3) and peri-urban areas (3) but also predominantly rural settings (2). Thus, the research acknowledged the presence of Boda-Boda riders in all parts of Uganda and took into account

the different political and infrastructural conditions outside Kampala. In each setting, it aimed at identifying the political embeddedness of Boda-Boda riders and the relationship between the Boda-Boda sector, state institutions and politicians. It featured a qualitative approach and used semi-structured interviews to target Boda-Boda riders, their leaders and politicians, as well as relevant civil servants. In total, 150 interviews were conducted. These were supplemented by casual conversations with Boda-Boda riders and by observations of Boda-Boda mobilizations during the 2020/2021 general election campaigns. While Boda-Boda riders possessed the most detailed knowledge on their personal interaction with state authorities, individual riders were unlikely to know all the ways in which the sector interacts with the state in their respective area. Furthermore, riders might not have been aware of some of the effects of their behaviour on the politics of informal public transport. Stage and association leaders were therefore included because they function as intermediaries between the state and their riders. Their perspective was contrasted with interviews with politicians on different levels, from the Local Council Two up to national MPs and presidential candidates. Politicians provided a broad set of views, reaching from an overview of the politics of the Boda-Boda sector to the regional and local dynamics of Boda-Boda management. Additionally, civil servants were interviewed to capture the perspective of state institutions on informal transport.

6. Navigating Boda-Boda politics

While Boda-Bodas continue to operate informally, the organization of public transport is strongly debated within Ugandan politics. Therefore, this informality should not be mistaken for a lack of state interest nor the absence of a political tug of war over their status. This is also shown by the empirical data that revealed four "strategies" through which Boda-Boda riders influence the politics of informal public transport in Uganda and contribute to the persistence of their informality. These are protest, evasion, self-organization, and political embeddedness.

Although Boda-Boda riders apply all four strategies frequently, they are not part of a general plan to defy the state. Instead, they are better described as a collection of Boda-Boda movements and actions that in one way or another stabilize the informal status quo. While protests are conscious decisions intended to counter regulation attempts, other strategies such as self-organization or evasion are executed out of economic or organizational necessity and not with the intention of influencing politics. As a common feature, however, all strategies source their effectiveness from the mobile capabilities of Boda-Boda riders and contribute towards preventing regulation and taxation of the motorcycle taxi sector.

Protest

Protest is the most direct strategy Boda-Boda riders use to exert political influence. It is also a relatively frequent occurrence in Kampala, but also in the smaller towns and rural areas. Boda-Boda protest can erupt for a variety of reasons. Apart from party-facilitated political protests (c.f. Möller and Doevenspeck 2023), Boda-Boda riders protest if their livelihoods are

threatened or if state institutions intend to exert control over the sector. In the past, Boda-Boda protests were caused by taxation and registration attempts (The Independent Uganda 2022), operational curfew during the Covid-19 pandemic (Daily Monitor 2020a) and increased police controls (The Independent Uganda 2020). T, protests can be directed towards different targets. Municipal councils and police stations are common targets but ministers, the parliament and the president (Daily Monitor 2020b) have already faced crowds of Boda-Boda riders. These, sometimes violent, protests can include rallies, the constructions of barricades and the blocking of traffic. In some cases, Boda-Boda riders have also attacked administrative or police officers and destroyed property. *"The municipality decided to register all Boda-Bodas. […]. It caused all the fighting. They burnt KCCA vehicles and beat all KCCA workers" (Boda-Boda Leader Kampala (114KKKL)).*

During protests, Boda-Bodas deploy their mobility skilfully to gather, execute the protest and avoid arrest. By using their motorbikes, they can select the time and location of the protest and reach the venue before countermeasures can be taken. When the police attempts to crack down on the protesters, they disperse quickly due to their unrivalled individual mobility. Sometimes, they then reassemble at another location and continue their protest, while in the aftermath of a riot, the lack of registration complicates the tracking of participants. During protests, Boda-Boda riders are surrounded by representations of fearlessness, violence and mobility and share a strong sense of solidarity, which increases their resolve. Authorities not only fear the economic and political backlash of Boda-Boda protests but also frequently lack the resources to confine or suppress them. *"The Boda-Boda association and the community*

demonstrated against poor roads. They dug bigger holes within the roads and police came. There was a lot of chaos, teargas and three of them were arrested. But, they continued rioting for days. […]. So, I went and talked to the police, […] to have these three released because they were still demonstrating […]. So, they released them"(Boda-Boda Leader Bunyangabu (112KR)).

Protests have proven to be effective in preventing unwanted regulation and taxation. As a result the threat of escalating Boda-Boda protests already significantly reduces the action taken to formalize the sector. By organizing powerful and often successful protests, Boda-Bodas are also exceptional amongst professional groups in Uganda, where most forms of protest face harsh police responses. The mobility used to evade arrest during protest is also used in other settings to counter formalization attempts.

Evasion

Protest can be seen as the *ultima ratio* of Boda-Boda riders during which they risk their freedom, health and, most importantly, their motorcycles. In contrast, evasion strategies are executed as part of their daily routines. Instead of confronting state power, this strategy uses mobility to avoid contact and confrontation. Riders inform each other about the location of the numerous roadblocks and traffic police checkpoints along major roads and avoid them by taking minor roads and footpaths. Thereby they use their knowledge of the area, the speed and agility of their motorcycles and their bike handling skills. Evasion was also used effectively

during the Covid-19 related curfews on Boda-Bodas that forced the riders to operate under the threat of harsh fines and bike impoundment (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 81). Furthermore, Boda-Bodas also regularly evade local authority officials who try to collect taxes or register riders. While this can mean leaving a stage or area for a few hours, continuous pressure can also force riders to shift their area of operation for longer periods. To avoid surprise-crackdowns, Boda-Bodas again rely on their mobility, their vast networks and their strong sense of unity (Mukwaya et al. 2022, 60). The close relationship between mobility and social networks is not surprising, as social networks have long been identified as important drivers of mobility (Urry 2012).

Evasion strategies make controlling Boda-Bodas more costly and less effective. At the same time, they save the riders money and make their business more profitable. Through millions of evasions executed daily, Boda-Bodas therefore outmanoeuvre the state. "*It should be [50.000 UGX (13$)] a year. […] Bicycles are paying but motorcycles are not easy. It's difficult to get money from them" (Municipality official Lira (244LOW)).* Furthermore, evasions enable Boda-Bodas to operate without costly licences and safety equipment. Even measures that do not restrict Boda-Bodas but could enable future regulations, such as censuses, are complicated by the difficulties of accessing the riders. *And you cannot force them, they are resisting it. We have tried to make a census of them. But we failed* […]. *But although officially we make the stages, they create the stages through themselves" (Deputy Mayor Mbarara (184MFB))*. A high turnover among Boda-Boda riders further complicates

formalization and can be seen as another way in which Boda-Bodas evade state control. "*KCCA has to regulate their business, but I don't think they are able to reach all of them. Because every day some people are joining the business and it requires some regular monitoring and check-ups*" *(Ministry of Works and Transport Official (114KOJP)).* While already-registered riders frequently shift towards other employment opportunities, young men without knowledge of the formalities join the business (c.f. Mallett et al. 2022, 10). This reduces the long-term impacts of training and registration exercises and weakens the grip of the state on the Boda-Boda sector. The repeated crackdowns and unsuccessful registration exercises strain the personnel and financial capacities of the often-underfunded transport authorities, which now see indirect control via Boda-Boda associations as the more effective way of implementing regulatory measures.

Self-organization

"*First of all I must appreciate that they are always organized, so it is very easy for one to use that organized group. If they favour [you]" (Resident District Commissioner Northern Uganda (254LAR))*. While Boda-Bodas use mobility to confront and evade the state, it also helps them to organize effectively. In all research areas, riders created systems of self-management and collective bargaining. These local and regional Boda-Boda associations or cooperatives have become important stakeholders that actively engage in the politics of public transport (Ehebrecht, Heinrichs, and Lenz 2018, 249; Ezeibe et al. 2017, 258). While in most

areas district-wide associations united the majority of riders, in Mbarara and Kampala different associations had overlapping areas of operation. The divide in both cities followed political lines but also the prospect of better representation and economic benefits.

"*Ideally we are supposed to have […] one organization for all the Boda-Bodas. But unfortunately due to political differences and political parties, some of them tried to associate with other political parties. So, you find that this group is in support of President Museveni, [another group], they support Besigye and others. So instead of having one umbrella organization coordinating all the activities, it was found to be very difficult now*" (City official Mbarara (184MCO)).

Although most riders continue to operate informally, associations are usually registered. By blurring the line between formal and informal association enable Boda-Bodas to participate in state programs that offer loans, grants or other benefits. This illustrates "the popular characterization of informal transport workers in Africa as being 'inside the system, but outside the law (Rasmussen 2012, 415)'(Agbiboa 2019c, 1)". Associations are therefore a gateway for state interaction with the Boda-Boda sector but also facilitate attempts to formalize it (c.f. Roca and Simabuko 2020, 382). In all districts, training exercises, safety requirements and stage demarcations were negotiated between authorities and associations. Cooperation on these issues thereby appeared to be favourable to both sides. It allows Boda-Bodas to take part in the decision-making processes, while authorities see it as a more promising and less costly alternative to the direct enforcement of regulations. However, the

exceptional power of Boda-Boda associations (Doherty 2022, 243) results in strong negotiation positions for the Boda-Bodas. This is exacerbated by the limited leverage that authorities hold over Boda-Boda associations. Even if they can force association leaders to adhere to their demands, loose membership structures can cause associations to disintegrate, while the riders create new associations or move to a different one. "*The leaders, […] are the big problems of that association. […] That's why the association collapsed, but we are renewing it very fast*" (Boda-Boda rider Soroti (133SAAG)).

Mobility plays an important role in the creation and operations of associations. Only through the ability to move quickly and individually can Boda-Bodas maintain face-to-face contact and thus sizable organizations. Mobility is also required to take part in association activities, while association leaders need it to reach out to their members. Coincidentally, Boda-Boda groups rarely extend beyond the working range of their members.

Associations advocate the interests of riders, but also try to establish systems of internal regulation. Through membership fees, registration, mediation of conflicts and action against criminal members, they position themselves as providers of law and order. Due to the mutual benefits of this strategy to riders and authorities, it has experienced widespread adoption. However, the regular rise and decline of associations and loose membership policies leave significant gaps in their control over the sector as a whole. This allows riders to operate outside of organized frameworks or to disregard their rules.

While self-organizational bodies are an effective way for Boda-Boda riders to gain official recognition and participate in the policy-making processes, they have not yet proven to be a vehicle for implementing binding rules for the sector. On the other hand, they facilitate evasion and protest and thus strengthen the position of Boda-Boda riders. Repeated attempts to unify all Boda-Boda riders under one umbrella (The Observer 2018) have, however, shown, that the government sees forced unionization as a promising way to control the sector.

Political embeddedness

"Boda-Bodas are largely becoming a […] political tool. And also, the [ruling] NRM [party] because it has the financial resources, and the administrative resources, are pushing to own this group. They have given them [motorbikes]. Actually, it is NRM, which is largely promoting Boda-Boda as a dominant force and a dominant employment and dominant actor in politics. They have given them loans. Actually NRMs policy is Boda-Boda" (Salaamu Musumba, FDC Vice-Chairperson (223KSM)).

"There is a team called Freedom Boda. It is the official outfit of the Kyagulanyi Boda-Boda campaign. […]. I think it should be about 5000 [riders]." (Leading National Unity Platform (NUP) politician (11KOG)).

The close relationship between the Boda-Boda sector and politicians has become vital to its persistence. Over the last decades, various politicians, most notably President Museveni

(National Resistance Movement, NRM) and Erias Lukwago (FDC) the mayor of Kampala, have protected the informality of Boda-Bodas and shielded them from taxation and regulation (The Independent Uganda 2022). As the political use of Boda-Bodas extends across the entire political spectrum, few politicians openly call for stricter regulations for fear of losing their support. Boda-Bodas are not only a large voting block but are also highly politicised and important campaign activists. During elections, they act as mobile and readily available, but usually hired, supporters for all political sides. Additionally, they are an important source of political information for many of their customers. Their versatility has thus made Boda-Bodas crucial for winning any election in Uganda (c.f. Möller and Doevenspeck 2023).

"[…] we wanted the Boda-Boda people to pay parking fees. […]. [But] the president once announced that they shouldn't pay. So, we are also a bit scared to start charging them which would now put us at conflict with the president. Because the president gives them a listening ear. […]. He believes they have a lot to do as far as mobilization of his votes is concerned" (Commercial officer Mbarara (184MCO)).

Pressurizing lower authorities is an important way to provide political patronage. Although these theoretically have the right to regulate and tax Boda-Bodas, informal instructions from the government have in many cases prevented any action. The institutional and budgetary weakness of local governments makes them largely dependent on the goodwill of the national government, which discourages taxation of the Boda-Boda sector.

Economic and political benefits have led Boda-Boda riders and associations to seek an active role in politics. Since 2011, when President Museveni campaigned under the slogan "Museveni *pakalast"* (Wilkins 2016, 634), Boda-Bodas have been a major asset to any political campaign in Uganda (c.f. Möller and Doevenspeck 2023).

To propel political campaigns they rely on their mobility, which makes it an important reason for their political embeddedness as a whole. During campaigns, they act as mobile billboards, supporters at motorcades, collectors of information and defiant protesters. Related representations of their mobility further create the image of Boda-Bodas as being an indispensable political asset. To secure it, politicians tend to protect and expand the mobility of Boda-Bodas by supporting their economic freedom and preventing movement restrictions. In several cases, the government facilitated the mobility and livelihood of Boda-Boda riders by donating or loaning hundreds of motorcycles to associations (c.f. Figure 1) and individual riders. Consequently, the country's political economy has been described as "Bodanomics" by observers (Daily Monitor 2022a).

Figure 1: Pro NRM Boda-Boda association Mbarara (Source: Own Work)

Security agencies also capitalize on Boda-Boda mobility. Opposition politicians repeatedly accused them of using Boda-Bodas as a disguise for security operatives to gather intelligence and sabotage political activities. Many Boda-Boda riders also serve in the "Crime Preventers" auxiliary police forces (Tapscott 2016, 694) or the paramilitary "Local Defence Units", both accused of violence against the opposition.

Amidst the political competition, attempts of both the government and opposition parties to establish dominant Boda-Boda groups in certain areas rarely succeed. While the Boda-Boda

association in Lira was seen as loyal to the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) strongman Jimmy Arkena at the time of the research, in Mbarara an FDC-dominated association experienced the breakaway of an NRM-linked faction. In Kampala, neither the NUP-affiliated but rather loosely organized "Freedom Boda" group nor NRM-backed associations such as "Boda 2010" and "Muhoozi Project Boda-Boda" have so far achieved dominance. In all cases, the divergent forces of state pressure and widespread political support for the opposition amongst riders have prevented political unification. This equilibrium is important for maintaining the informality of Boda-Bodas and securing political patronage. While more governmental control would reduce the need to aide Boda-Bodas and allow formalization, a complete shift towards opposition parties would likely result in a loss of patronage and increased crackdowns on the sector.

7. Conclusion

Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis are important transport providers in Uganda and a crucial employment opportunity. Over decades, they have maintained their informality and gained a privileged position amongst transporters. Empirical research shows that this persistent informality is not only caused by the "weakness of the state" but is also the result of multi-level negotiations between the transporters and other stakeholders within the politics of informal public transport.

Although informal transport workers are sometimes described as politically weak, this is not the case for Boda-Bodas. Instead of being passive recipients of governmental action, they are "actively taking part in the system they denounce" (Agbiboa 2019 S1). Boda-Bodas succeed in balancing informality and recognition by executing several strategies that influence the actions and attitudes of state institutions and decision-makers. During protests, Boda-Bodas directly confront the state and use force to defend their interests. Evasion strategies aim at preventing state control over Boda-Boda riders and raise the costs of enforcing regulations while self-organization within associations strengthens their resolve but also provides Boda-Bodas with an effective vehicle for collective bargaining. Professional associations also advocate the self-management of the sector and enable Boda-Bodas to participate in official programs though their formal status. Finally, political embeddedness and their role as activists during election campaigns secure Boda-Bodas patronage from all political factions. Nevertheless, these strategies are not the product of centralized planning. Instead, they result from the aggregate of individual movements and the decisions of riders to participate in each strategy. The effectiveness of the strategies thus derives from their individual mobility and the high number of Boda-Bodas executing each strategy.

Boda-Boda mobility is rooted, to a large extent, in the use of motorcycles. Through them, fast movements and individual changes of location become possible. In addition, Boda-Boda riders are skilled drivers who possess good local knowledge. Consequently, they are widely regarded as an extremely mobile group. This combination of physical mobility, mobile

practices and representations of their mobility, enables Boda-Bodas to execute powerful strategies and actively engage in the politics of informal public transport. Mobility constitutes a distinct advantage that Boda-Bodas possess over other professional groups and the state institutions pushing for their formalization. As a result, administrators are forced to adopt "artistic" (Agbiboa 2019c, 1) methods to manage them. They use mixed approaches of negotiation, enforcement and establishing party-linked associations or allow self-regulation. The use of mobile strategies by Boda-Boda riders and their effectiveness in influencing transport politics illustrates how transport workers can successfully engage in the politics of informal public transport. Thereby, specific local conditions solidify their status. Heavy governmental subsidies and far-ranging support for the opposition amongst the Boda-Boda riders create a political equilibrium within the sector. This causes competition for their favour and cements their protected and privileged status as informal transport providers. Just like long-time President Museveni, Boda-Bodas therefore appear to remain a part of Uganda *pakalast*. However, the rapid increase in Boda-Boda numbers has prompted calls for stricter management in Kampala. If popular opinion turns against them, Boda-Bodas might receive less political support in the future.

None of the strategies is limited to Boda-Boda riders of Uganda, however and informal transport workers in other settings have used similar strategies (c.f. for Thailand Sopranzetti 2014; for DR Congo Verweijen 2015, 198). They therefore exert a relevant but still unrecognised influence on the politics of informal public transport in their respective settings.

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Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the author. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restriction

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Title:

Freedom of Speech on the Move

How Motorcycle Taxis open up small mobile Spaces for political Talk in Uganda

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Abstract:

This article addresses motorcycle taxis in Uganda, called Boda-Boda, as spaces of free political speech. It argues that their characteristics as small mobile spaces allow them to persist as one of the few remaining spaces for free speech in an increasingly restrictive political setting. To review Boda-Bodas as mobile space the article builds on Harvey's concepts on space and Cresswell's approach to mobility. By linking them, it proposes a framework for examining the multidimensional impacts of small mobile spaces. This framework is used to examine Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis based on empirical data collected in Uganda between 2018 and 2022. Findings reveal that the multidimensional characteristics of the motorcycle space and its potent mobilities encourage conversations on the Boda-Boda and detach it from its surroundings. Prolific political participation, rooted in the motorcycle-based mobility of Boda-Boda riders, has further led to the emergence of discourses labelling Boda-

Boda riders as a source of political information who frequently politicise the conversations. The role of Boda-Boda riders as a source of political news causes competition for their favour between all political parties. As the small mobile space creates an inaccessible black box, Boda-Bodas continue to retain their role as spaces for free speech.

Keywords: Space, Mobility, Boda-Boda, Freedom of Speech, Uganda, Harvey,

1. Introduction

"Where is the Freedom of expression when you charge me because of my expression? […] They look at the youth and say we're distractors […]. Get up, boys […]. Boda-Bodas get involved too" ("Freedom", Boby Wine).

During the Ugandan 2020/21 general election campaigns, musician and politician Robert Kyagulanyi aka. Bobi Wine and his National Unity Platform (NUP) emerged as the main rival of long-time President Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Despite heavy crackdowns on NUP rallies (Wilkins *et al.* 2021, p. 640) and the denial of media space, he received a triumphant reception in all the districts he visited. Simultaneously, the relentless efforts of the NUP campaign and media team successfully established alternative channels for communication and advertisement (Macdonald *et al.* 2023, p. 282). Building on their experience in music promotion, Kyagulanyi's team skilfully used social media (Wilkins *et al.* 2021, p. 639), songs (Osiebe 2020, p. 89) and branded merchandise during their campaign. Thereby they bypassed the traditional ways of mass communication such as TV and radio stations or newspapers controlled by the government. The lack of representation within the traditional media nevertheless left a gap in the NUP strategy as many Ugandans do not frequently use digital social networks (Kasadha 2020, p. 8). With his campaign mostly attracting the younger cohorts of the population (Wilkins *et al.* 2021, p. 629), Kyagulanyi was

able to play another ace from his sleeve: The voices of the country's countless motorcycle taxi riders, commonly referred to as Boda-Bodas.

Every day Boda-Boda riders engage with people of various age groups and social backgrounds. They are also widely known for their talkativeness and their interest in politics. Furthermore, Boda-Boda riders are considered to be mainly opposition-leaning younger men. Due to these characteristics, NUP strategists embraced them, as a direct link to the electorate. Spearheaded by 5000 diehard supporters called "Freedom Boda", motorcycle taxis not only accompanied the NUP campaign trains but also became moving billboards and political advisors to their customers. As such, they effectively defied state attempts to limit the freedom of political expression in Uganda and functioned as an important source of political information for the Ugandan public.

The aim of this article is to analyse the role of these motorcycle taxis in Uganda as small mobile spaces for political communication and debate. Based on fieldwork between 2018 and 2022 it examines the multidimensional ways in which the mobile Boda-Boda space enables drivers and passengers to engage in political discussion within the increasingly restrictive political setting of the country. To do so, the article draws on a 'harveyan' perspective on space. It uses the lenses of absolute, relative and relational space and aligns them with tempo-spatial relocating or mobile spaces. The adapted lenses are then used to highlight the influence of space (c.f. Harvey 1969, p. 197) on the ability of Boda-Boda riders and passengers to express their political opinions during rides. Thereby it follows Harvey's focus on urban spaces and tempo-spatial relations as well as its application for the analysis of public transport (c.f. Li *et al.* 2021).

In doing so, the article aims to expand the literature on the political dimension of space mobility and co-travelling (Adey 2006, Axtell *et al.* 2008, te Brömmelstroet *et al.* 2017). By investigating mobile

spaces it builds on the mobility paradigm (Sheller 2014) and a harveyan approach to space (Harvey 2006). To do so it highlights how the tempo-spatial detachment of individual mobile entities creates temporary dislodged spaces of free speech. Furthermore, the examination of the motorcycle as a small mobile space requires a methodological discussion of the implications of these spaces for qualitative research. While the limitations for establishing a co-presence within the tempo-spatial detached spaces provide the foundation for their political role they also create challenges for conducting research on talk during motorcycle rides (c.f. Jaworski 2014).

The following chapters will introduce Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis and the political setting they operate in, as well as the theoretical foundations of mobile spaces. After outlining the methods and empirical research process the article will then describe the mobile freedoms of speech created within the Boda-Boda space as well as the use of these freedoms by political actors. Finally, it will reflect on potential challenges to these spaces of free speech.

2. Uganda: Free speech and Boda-Boda

The political system of the Republic of Uganda is frequently described as (semi)authoritarian (e.g. Khisa 2019a, p. 729, Wilkins *et al.* 2021, c.f. 631). Since 2005, free and fair elections have been enshrined in the constitution. This allowed opposition parties like the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) and the National Unity Platform (NUP) to participate in elections and win a number of constituencies. Ever since, however, all elections have been marred by irregularities (Abrahamsen and Bareebe 2016), violence (Wilkins *et al.* 2021, p. 631) and general difficulties for the opposition to express their political agenda (Cheeseman 2021). In their 2023 report, Freedom House rated Uganda

as “not free” and criticised multiple formal and informal limitations to political, media, personal and academic freedoms (Freedom House 2024).

Article 29(1)(a) of the Ugandan constitution proclaims that “every person shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression which shall include freedom of the press and other media” (The Parliament of Uganda 1995, Rukundo 2018, p. 259). Nevertheless, in many cases, the Ugandan state does not guarantee freedom after speech to activists, journalists, scholars and ordinary citizens (c.f. Abrahamsen and Bareebe 2016, p. 763). Several laws such as the “Referendum Act”, the “Regulation of Interception of Communication Act” (Ssentongo and Alava 2023, p. 308) and the “Computer Misuse Act” (Rukundo 2018, 259f) allow law enforcement agencies to suppress unwanted public opinion. The degree to which freedom of speech is granted in Uganda has thereby varied over the 38 years of NRM rule. After more repressive years during the one-party era in the 1990s (Ottemoeller 1998, p. 103), restrictions were eased and freedom of speech reached a shallow peak in 2005 when the state re-instated multiparty elections (Makara *et al.* 2009, p. 197). Since then, Museveni’s NRM government has again tightened its grip on public protests, media outlets and the social media realm (Garbe 2023, p. 11) with each election cycle (Sobel and McIntyre 2020, p. 661).

Traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, radio and TV stations, are restricted in various ways. Some newspapers, TV channels and radio stations are under the ownership or control of state bodies and NRM sympathizers (Rukundo 2018, p. 262, Sobel and McIntyre 2020, p. 663). Furthermore, the content of all media outlets requires approval through the Uganda Communications Commission (Rukundo 2018, p. 263), and media licences are often denied to opposition-leaning or investigative media. Repeated police raids on critical outlets such as the tabloid “Red Pepper” (Chama 2019) have also led to a culture of self-censure among media workers (Rukundo 2018, p. 264, Sobel and McIntyre

2020, p. 660). Non-accredited journalists face even harsher treatment and some have been killed or injured by the police during rallies in 2012 and 2020 (RFI 2012, Al Jazeera 2020).

At public protests, state violence is not restricted to journalists. Almost any critical – and thus unauthorized – rally in Uganda faces violent dissolution. In the process, teargas, batons, rubber and live bullets are frequently used to intimidate and disperse the crowds (Titeca 2019, p. 4).

"To be having a meeting. When you are gathering like twenty you must have a permit. Which [the government] is not actually serving. So, for the people in government, they can do it. But for the people in opposition, they cannot. When they do that, they are arrested" ((174MK) FDC politician Mbarara).

In the current political environment. We can't fundraise, both, within and from outside. We can't have free space to talk to people about our manifesto, our ideology, our program because the space has been narrowed and political activity has been banned basically" ((231FK) Uganda People's Congress (UPC) politician, Busia).

Over recent years, Ugandan authorities have reacted to the advent of mobile phones, the internet and social media as spaces for political debate. Because technical and economic challenges make complete control over different platforms difficult, authorities aim at limiting access (c.f. Titeca 2019, p. 3, Wilkins *et al.* 2021, p. 637). Mobile data prices in Uganda have for a long time been amongst the highest on the continent (Research ICT Africa 2024). It is still the case that many citizens are not able to afford regular social media usage (Gillwald *et al.* 2019) due to the former social media tax, now transformed into a tax on internet bundles (Boxell and Steinert-Threlkeld 2022, p. 1). When elections approach, social media is seen as a tool for collecting evidence about election fraud and for organizing protests. During those times Uganda has repeatedly experienced days of mobile internet outage,

followed by several more days of limited access to message and social media services (Wilkins and Vokes 2023, p. 271).

Freedom of speech is also limited at academic institutions. Article 29(1)(b) of the constitution proclaims “freedom of thought, conscience and belief which shall include academic freedom in institutions of learning”; in practice, it is contradicted by various measures. Universities continue to restrict the notoriously political student representatives (Daily Monitor 2022b), especially at the prestigious Makerere University (Mugume and Luescher 2017), while critical scholars face state repression (Rukundo 2018). On top of these encroachments on the freedom of expression, arrests, killings (Osiebe 2020, p. 89) and forced disappearances (Swinkels 2019, p. 5) have created a general atmosphere of fear, and forced scholars, journalists and social activists into self-censure (Sobel and McIntyre 2020, p. 664).

Although restrictions on the freedom of speech in Uganda are usually eased in the aftermath of elections, recent election cycles have experienced a steady increase in state inference with the constitutionally enshrined freedoms of the citizens. However, while sanctions and persecutions target politicians, journalists and activists, Ugandans remain mostly able to discuss politics in private (c.f. Khisa 2019b, p. 358).

A group particularly known for their interest in discussing political topics are ‘Boda-Boda’ motorcycle taxi drivers. These omnipresent transporters serve the individual transport demands of almost all Ugandans. Operating equally in rural and urban environments, they can transport customers and heavy loads quickly and skilfully through unpaved tracks or traffic jams (Venter *et al.* 2014, p. 240). Despite being more expensive than shared taxis or buses, Boda-Bodas are used by almost all parts of society due to their specific and unmatched mobilities and widespread availability (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p.

4). For most Ugandans, they are also the only available form of individual transport beyond the fixed routes of buses and shared taxis (Evans *et al.* 2018, p. 679). Research data and publications suggest that currently, more than 250,000 Boda-Bodas operate in and around Kampala alone, employing 5-10 percent of the population. Boda-Boda is thus considered the most important employment after agriculture (e.g. Doherty 2017, p. 194, Evans *et al.* 2018, p. 681). In between rides, Boda-Boda riders spend much of their time waiting at their operational bases, called "stages", in the company of their peers. These stages often include 15-30 but sometimes more than 100 riders, depending on the number of customers at the particular location (Doherty 2017, p. 197).

To become a Boda-Boda rider one only requires access to a motorbike. The Indian (c.f. Evans *et al.* 2018, p. 680) or Chinese models commonly used cost around 1200 dollars and are often leased by specialized companies or local businessmen (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 28). Because formal requirements such as driving permits and trading licences, registration and safety gear are weakly enforced, the sector has particularly low entrance barriers. This makes it an important labour reservoir for young men between 18 and 35 who make up the majority of riders (Raynor 2014, p. 24). Boda-Boda riders who own the bike they are riding often earn an above-average income (Wanume *et al.* 2019, p. 5). Nevertheless, they remain socially marginalized in various regards (c.f. Öbom 2020). Boda-Boda riders are perceived as dangerous, unruly and lawless (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 4) but also in waiting for better employment (c.f. Oldenburg 2019). In contrast, Boda-Bodas are also associated with freedom (Öbom 2020, p. 13), mobility (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 4), courage (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 64) and opportunity (Wanume *et al.* 2019, p. 3). Over recent election cycles, Boda-Bodas have also taken up a role as crucial facilitators of political campaigns for all political sides (Möller and

Doevenspeck 2023) and are known for avidly discussing politics amongst their peers and with customers (Doherty 2017, p. 206).

3. Small mobile Spaces

The analysis of how Boda-Boda space opens up pockets of free speech requires a conceptualization of this small and mobile spatial setting. To do so, this article draws upon David Harvey's approach to space (Harvey 2005). It uses the three lenses Harvey proposes for reflecting on space in general and aligns them towards trans-local or mobile spaces to outline their particular characteristics. By emphasizing mobility beyond the act of compressing space-time, the approach taken differs from using a purely mobility-focused perspective such as Tim Creswell's operationalization of mobility (Cresswell 2010). It pays additional attention to the characteristics and effects of the mobile space itself without limiting the perspective to a one-dimensional and static, materialistic approach (c.f. Kabachnik 2012, p. 215).

In, "Space as a Key Word", David Harvey outlines his proposal for three dimensions through which space can be approached (Harvey 2005, 93f). He acknowledges the existence of absolute space, which is "actual" and materialistic in nature (Harvey 2005, p. 115) and consists of mappable and measurable entities, such as plots, bridges, streets or buildings. His absolute space, however, doesn't include meaning nor any time dimension. To integrate time into his concepts of space, Harvey introduces relative space as a second lens. This dimension of space focuses on local relations of people and objects within space and on examining changes within them. Thus, it can be used for reviewing positionalities, movements and flows beyond measurable absolute distances (Harvey 1969, p. 210). Relative space is tempo-spatial in nature and therefore the space of mobility. This makes it crucial for

reflecting on mobile spaces. Any space remains meaningless, however, if its social dimensions, such as spatial interpretations and personal interaction within space and time, are not considered. The relational space reflects on this (Li *et al.* 2021, p. 1). It incorporates "accumulated cultural experience" (Harvey 1969, p. 227), social practices, opinions and discourses about spatial phenomena and creates the value of spaces to humans (Harvey 2005, p. 97). Harvey considers all three dimensions relevant to approaching space in its complex and inherently philosophical nature (Harvey 2005, p. 98). Therefore, he encourages the use of these spatial lenses for understanding a particular place. He also suggests comparing the three spatial perspectives with the field of application using a matrix (Harvey 2005, p. 104). Applying Harvey's dimensions of space onto mobile spaces follows the proposed use of these general dimensions of space, as Harvey stated: "Space becomes whatever we make of it […] it is neither absolute, relative or relational in itself, but it can become one or all simultaneously […]" (Harvey 2009, p. 13).

Reviewing small spaces that are within a process of tempo-spatial relocation relative to their surroundings presents the article's approach to the application of the three lenses. Thereby it aims to enable a more detailed examination of these sub-categories of space. Addressing mobile space presupposes an emphasis on the tempo-spatial dimension, not only within relative and relational space but also within absolute space (Adey 2006). In absolute space, mobile spaces are seen here as the Euclidian geometrical dimensions of a homogeneously relocating entity, as well as its internal geometries. In a broader sense, they can also include the materialistic environments traversed by a mobile space (c.f. Axtell *et al.* 2008, p. 903). Such mobile spaces might be elevators, commuter trains (Axtell *et al.* 2008), cars (Sheller and Urry 2006, p. 209) or a whole region like the west-African Sahel (c.f. Retaillé and Walther 2011).

Harvey (2009) sees space as inherently related to time, and relative to each person's view (Wiegand 2012, p. 87). Adey equally considers the relative spatial dimension to be essential for anything moving (Adey 2006), since the movement of spaces presupposes a constantly changing relational dynamic towards its surroundings. Examining these changing relationships allows for the characterization of their movements. This not only includes the directions and paths of the movement but also the absolute and relative velocities of the moving space. Furthermore, the interactions between spatial entities, such as frictions, and flows in between the moving spaces and their environment, become tangible. The tempo-spatial characteristics of mobile spaces then help to identify them as a separate entity (c.f. Bull 2003). The relational dimension of mobile spaces inquires as to why there is movement at all. This is particularly relevant when the movement of spaces is set in relation to human action or includes human movements (c.f. Axtell *et al.* 2008, p. 903). The relational lens thus reflects on the interactions, meanings and purposes of the mobility of moving space. Thereby it helps to link the movement to the absolute and relative dimensions of moving spaces to human feelings, experiences and discourses and thus its socio-political environment.

Within mobile spaces, identifying the characteristics of 'small' mobile spaces further sharpens the analytical toolkit used in this article. Based on the prerequisite of co-presence for various qualitative social research methods, such as participant observation, interviews, or ride-alongs, this article defines small spaces as spaces that severely limit co-presence to researchers applying these methods. The spatial limitations are thereby not necessarily caused by the lack of absolute space. Difficulties in establishing a lasting physical co-presence in relocating entities, or challenges to penetrating social barriers, can equally narrow space and create small spaces. At the same time, these limitations are crucial to the effectiveness of small spaces and the performance of those occupying them.

Small mobile spaces combine general perspectives on space, an emphasis on tempo-spatial relocation and a focus on the particularities of spatial limitations for co-presence. This spatial lens makes it possible to examine the spatial characteristics and performances of Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis. Encouragement for such use can be found within the works of Harvey, as he states: "The individual perception of space [e.g. as a space for free political discussion] based on the personal location [serves] as another example for the possible applications of relative space" (Harvey 2006, p. 122).

4. Methods and Fieldwork

The data used in this article was collected in Uganda between 2018 and 2022. It included three research periods over a total of 7 months in 2018, 2020/21 and 2022 and was part of extensive research on the embeddedness of Boda-Boda riders within the country's political system.

The small mobile space of Boda-Boda motorcycles directly impacted on the methods and the data collection process. Their limited absolute extent, their continuous relative relocations, and their relational seclusion limited the possibility of establishing a co-presence during discussions between Boda-Boda riders and their customers. It is therefore not surprising that most research on Boda-Bodas has so far relied on rather stationary data collection methods (c.f. Siya *et al.* 2019, Muni *et al.* 2020, Mallett *et al.* 2022). To approach this black box, the research used interviews and ride-alongs. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect experiences, opinions and discourses about political talk on Boda-Bodas. Additionally, a multitude of ride-alongs would re-enact these Boda-Boda-based conversations and thus allow for participant observations of the small mobile space. While neither of the two methods would grasp the very situation in which other customers would discuss with riders,

the triangulation of authentic participants' experiences and the researchers' re-enacted experience attempted to close in on the political practices within small mobile motorcycle spaces.

Over the course of the research, 155 semi-structured interviews were conducted in eight districts across Uganda. These include the capital Kampala, the cities of Mbarara and Gulu as well as the peri-urban districts of Soroti, Lira and Ibanda and rural areas in Busia and Bunyangabu district.

Figure 1: Research areas in 2018, 2020/21 and 2022. Design: Elbie Kivilcim

The interviews targeted three groups that were expected to provide most information on the political embeddedness of Boda-Boda riders in Uganda. The first target group consisted of representatives of the Boda-Boda sector such as riders and association leaders. The second group contained political actors who mobilized Boda-Bodas during election campaigns and often served a double role as legislators or were involved in the management of the motorcycle taxi sector. Amongst these were contestants and elected representatives of all political levels from the local council two (LCII) up to the presidential level. The third target group included government officials who did not hold an elected position but were involved in the management of the Boda-Boda sector and external observers such as activists and journalists. The interview guide addressed the general role of Boda-Bodas within the political system of Uganda and their mobilization during election campaigns. In the process, political talk between Boda-Boda riders and customers turned out to be an important vehicle for the spread of political information beyond established media outlets and social media channels.

As the second method, ridealongs were conducted almost daily during all research stays (c.f. Büscher *et al.* 2011). The use of Boda-Bodas for transport purposes allowed the researcher to engage the riders in political conversations and thus experience an immersive participant observation (c.f. Kawulich 2005) of the mobile Boda-Boda space. The hundreds of rides thereby featured almost as many drivers, motorcycles, distances and traffic situations. While sometimes two or three passengers shared the limited space with the driver, in most situations the author was the only passenger. The spatial limitations for direct observation of others made it necessary to re-create these situations by initiating conversation with the rider. Conversation topics turned out to be diverse. Due to the proximity to the 2021 general elections of one research period, a majority of rides during the research period included discussions about the upcoming elections. Outside the campaigning season, political talk remained

relatively common. Some rides, however, saw no or very limited conversation, due to noise, lack of interest or language barriers.

In general, the Boda-Boda riders rarely initiated the political talk outside of the campaigns. This was most likely due to the fact that the researcher was easily identifiable as a foreigner. However, they usually picked up the topic once a political issue was raised, which was regularly the case. Thereupon, they showed great interest in explaining their political views and experiences from participation in political activities. On one occasion, Boda-Boda riders at the "Old Taxi Park" in Kampala also pressured the researcher and other bystanders to shout NUP slogans and repeat the "V" salute used by the NUP campaign. However, due to the setting of these conversations within a small mobile space, this data collection method faced some obstacles. Taking notes and recording conversations was rarely possible on the moving motorbike and frequent background noise made some responses difficult to comprehend. Similarly, the seating arrangement, and sometimes helmets, could hamper the communication. In some cases, the riders were therefore invited to a follow-up interview at a stationary location, while notes had to be taken after the ride.

The methodological triangulation and the content of the collected data allow for some initial statements to be made about the characteristics of small mobile spaces and events taking place on the back of Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis. At the same time, the article proposes the use of additional mobile methods that can address the challenges for researchers to establish a co-presence within small mobile spaces. Mobile phones, drones following bikes, or atmospheric mapping are just some examples of how this could be achieved.

5. How Boda-Bodas create Spaces for free political speech in Uganda

"My work is about moving from a place to another. And I carry so many people. And I talk with so many people. On a day I can talk with about a hundred people" ((94KLG) Boda-Boda rider Kampala)).

Commuting and public transport have long been acknowledged as spaces for encounters and exchanges (Ettema *et al.* 2012, Jaworski 2014, te Brömmelstroet *et al.* 2017) and Boda-Boda rides are no exception to this. Furthermore, Newman et al. (2014) have shown that the mode of transport used for commuting is an important factor for political participation. Following Adey's notion that "to move is to be political" (Adey 2017, p. 165), this section characterizes Boda-Bodas as small mobile spaces to allow an analysis of their role as a space of free speech.

Boda-Boda: A moving space

Every day countless Boda-Bodas roam the streets of Uganda while others wait for customers at their stages. Stationary and the moving Boda-Bodas thereby differ in their spatial effectiveness. This article thereby focuses on the moving motorcycle to review the mobile Boda-Boda space. Such a separation is done because singling out the moving Boda-Boda allows for an analysis of the effects of tempo-spatial relocation on the characteristics of the motorcycle as a spatial entity. During periods of parking and standstill, Boda-Bodas lose many characteristics of the mobile space and might even be considered temporary assets of the Boda-Boda stage space. While this space is worth its own examination, it is less relevant to the functionalities of mobile Boda-Boda space. Only on the move does the Boda-Boda show the characteristic conditions in which riders and their customers engage in political discussion.

How can the mobile Boda-Boda space then be approached? In absolute space, mobile Boda-Boda space is demarcated by the size of the motorcycle. Due to its limited capacity for human occupancy,

the roughly 2m x 0.7m motorcycle is a rather small space, compared to buses and shared taxis. The "Bajaj Boxer 150cc" possessing these dimensions (Bajaj Auto Limited 2024) is by far the most common model currently in use while alternative models only differ insignificantly in design, size and mobility. The rider shares this small space with one, two or even three passengers whenever he navigates the assemblage of metal, rubber and plastic towards its destination. Thereby the motorcycle traverses various surrounding infrastructures. These might be new highways, pothole-riddled roads, rugged paths, sidewalks and small alleys.

In order to review the mobile aspect of the Boda-Boda space one has to consider the positional shifts of the moving motorcycle, which are necessarily relative to its surroundings (c.f. Adey 2006, p. 83). During a ride, the Boda-Boda rider steers his motorcycle through the surrounding environments and accelerates it to up to 90kmph. While this is not fast in comparison with some forms of transport like high-speed trains or planes, it is rapid in relation to all other road users in the cities and villages of Uganda. Heavy traffic and a shortage of well-maintained roads penalize car owners and force others to resort to walking or cycling (c.f. Evans *et al.* 2018, p. 681). Through their relatively high speed, the Boda-Bodas effectively detach from their surroundings, which are either stationary or unable to match their speeds and skilled mobile practices (c.f. Cresswell 2010, p. 20). During this time of tempo-spatial detachment, it is impossible for passengers to leave the speeding motorcycle or to interact with bystanders beyond short yells or gestures. Therefore, the mobile Boda space becomes separated from the spaces it traverses (c.f. Bull 2003). Although the absolute space limits the number of individuals who can occupy a motorbike, using a relative lens shows that mobility is fundamental for separating the Boda-Boda from its environment. Movement and its relativity is thus a distinctive feature of the mobile Boda space.

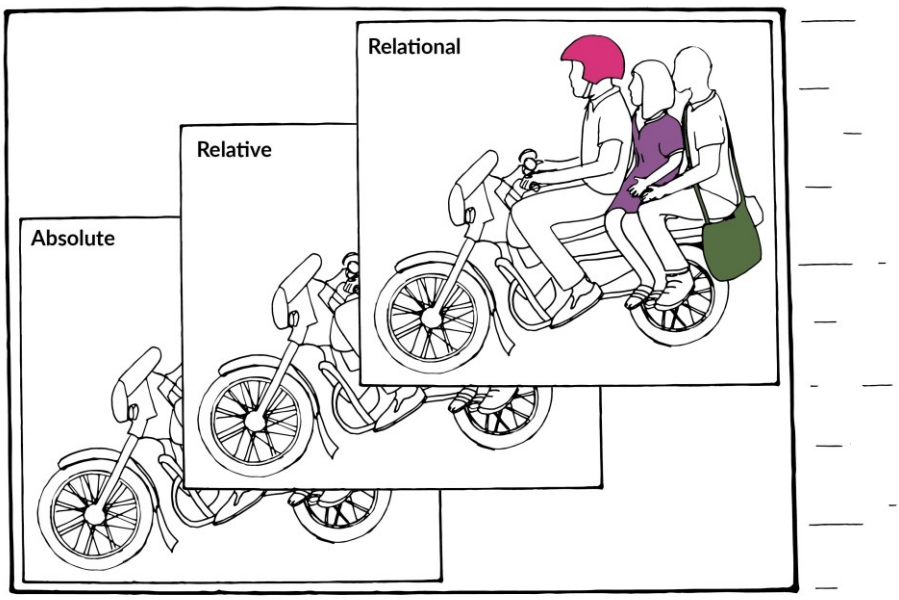

Figure 2: Spatial Dimensions of Boda-Boda space. Design: Elbie Kivilcim

Despite the importance of movement, the Boda-Boda space ultimately depends on its relational spatial dimension to become meaningful. Only through human interactions and discursive attributions can it gain relevancy to society and the political sphere in Uganda. Reviewed through the lens of relational space, Boda-Bodas entail different specific interactions, symbolic attributions and discourses. These include established conversational practices but also multiple perceptions and labels of the Boda-Boda space. While the stage functions as an important location for conversations amongst Boda-Boda riders (c.f. Doherty 2017, p. 197), talk between riders and their customers overwhelmingly takes place in the mobile Boda-Boda space. These two groups are consequently most prominently participating in defining the relational Boda-Boda space.

For Boda-Boda riders the use of their motorcycle is often linked to economic necessity and individual freedom. It is, however, also a space of dangers (Doherty 2017), conflict (Mallett *et al.* 2022) and exclusion (c.f. Öbom 2020), which can in several ways make it an unhealthy place (c.f. Vaca *et al.* 2020).

"*And for us, our job, you know it is very dangerous. You take somebody whom you don't know. You have seen these people whom have been killed*" ((164MAJKD)) Boda-Boda rider Mbarara).

For many, it is also a personal space that they spend much of their day in, and are quite familiar with.

"*Boda-Boda has given us some pride*" ((123SBGLI) Boda-Boda leader Soroti).

For customers, some elements of relational Boda-Boda space match those of the riders. Perceptions of Freedom (c.f. Gamberini 2014) and danger (Vaca *et al.* 2020), also regarding the unknown other riding the motorcycle, are equally experienced. Passengers might also perceive it to be dangerous, cramped or dirty or as the space of mobile freedom, convenience and opportunity. Additionally, it is referred to as a sphere for political debate (Möller and Doevenspeck 2023, p. 402)(c.f. Harvey 2005, p. 97).

Some perceptions and practices might, however, also differ between riders and customers. Due to their position on the back of the motorcycle, passengers do not have to steer the motorcycle and can use their presence within the space differently, e.g. by talking to the rider, being on the phone or watching the traversed environment. In contrast, the rider directs more attention towards the surrounding environment.

The multi-layered Boda-Boda space sets the stage for human interaction taking place within it. At the same time, it is also influenced by the physical and social actions it entails and makes it "a material and social reality forever (re)created in the moment" (referring to: Dodge and Kitchin 2005, p. 172, Adey 2006, p. 80). As such, it provides the basis for an analysis of the Boda-Boda space as a vehicle of free speech in Uganda.

Practised political Freedoms on the Boda-Boda

"*So for them, they love talking politics" ((254LAR)) Government Official Northern Uganda).*

Popular narratives depict Boda-Boda riders as a talkative and politically interested group that possesses a vast knowledge of all sorts of news and gossip. Despite this, not every Boda-Boda ride includes a lively conversation and not every discussion is political. An important reason why the political dimension of Boda-Boda rides remains relevant is the number of opportunities for political talk it creates. Each rider conducts an average of 15 trips per day (c.f. Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 29), which results in millions of encounters and opportunities for the spread of political information.

"They take information very quickly. As they take their ordinary customers, they are talking about politics. When the one they have taken is leaving the bike he has the knowledge about politics. So, the transformation of knowledge is easier with Boda-Bodas. Of course, a Boda-Boda on a day, can ride like twenty kilometres with different people. […] It is easier than a radio. […]. Even TVs. But for the Boda-Boda […] it's an easier spread" ((174MK) Politician Mbarara).

The consistent exposure towards Boda-Bodas offers Ugandans plenty of opportunity to engage in conversations while seated on the back of a motorcycle. As much as the Boda-Boda is a space for small talk and general discussion, this also makes it a space where much political talk takes place. In fact, there is no clear boundary for when any given topic is political. The keen interest of many riders in politics and the prolific political mobilization of the Boda-Boda sector ensure a high degree of political exposure on the part of the Boda-Boda riders, which increases the likelihood of talk being political (c.f. Möller and Doevenspeck 2023).

"*Because we are carrying passengers, we keep on communicating. Then I can talk to him: Ah, this [politician] is good or better go for this one. Then one can change his heart" ((114KKKL) Boda-Boda rider Kampala).*

"And with the extensive reach network... Because they go off the road. […] They go out of the towns. They go into the villages. And I mean, if on average a Boda-Boda carries a passenger for about 10-15 minutes, that is plenty of time to actually pass on a message, initiate a conversation, you know, that can trigger the passenger's thoughts, the passenger's reaction" ((1112CK) Journalist Kampala).

In the process of transportation, Boda-Boda riders often act as amplifiers of political ideas as they gather opinions and distribute them amongst their customers. This is supported by discussions amongst riders on the stages. The broad usage of Boda-Bodas throughout almost all levels of Ugandan society further facilitates this role and exposes riders to passengers with different social and political backgrounds and of all age groups. In addition, many Boda-Boda riders listen to radio broadcasts during rides or on their stages, which again contributes to their knowledge of political news and current debates.

I'm just talking about their mindset as they sit on those bikes, as they talk amongst themselves in the stages they are aggrieved by the marginalization within the economic setting. That renders them into already some kind of a politically charged group seeking change and seeking […] a different political setting ((213KKB) Kizza Besigye, former presidential candidate).

As elections draw closer, political talk on Boda-Bodas becomes more frequent. This frequency is accelerated by the efforts of parties and individual politicians to mobilize riders to advertise political messages to their customers (Möller and Doevenspeck 2023). For this, political actors use two strategies. On the one hand, they attempt to pay or convince the riders to decorate their motorcycles

with campaign stickers and posters. This makes the Boda-Boda a moving billboard and exposes both passengers and bystanders to political messages. These political advertisements link the motorcycle and its rider to a political side and act as conversation starters for political talk. On the other hand, politicians will encourage Boda-Boda riders to actively engage in political conversations with their customers and advertise the respective party or politicians to them.

"Whenever a Boda-Boda rider would get a customer, you would find that they have my photos on their vehicles. For example, when a Boda-Boda rider meets a customer, […] he would say: Please, I ask a vote for this guy. So they promotion me. So, they go when they are talking about me ((122TA) NRM Politician Bunyangabu).

Using Boda-Bodas for political advertisement is seen as highly effective, due to the established role of Boda-Boda riders as transmitters of news. However, there is little the politician can do to make sure a rider indeed advertises the candidate or party to his customers. This limits the willingness of politicians to pay for this activity and many entrust it only to Boda-Boda riders already loyal to them.

The two strategies are often used alongside further mobilization strategies, such as transporting activists and voters, participation in motorcades and engagement in political violence (Möller and Doevenspeck 2023). Together they drastically increase the exposure of Boda-Boda riders towards the political sphere, and consequently the likelihood of political talk with customers.

Figure 3: A Boda-Boda passing political advertisements in Gulu in January 2021. Source: Own Work

How the mobile Boda-Boda Space enables these Strategies

The restrictive setting of Uganda narrows the space for public political talk, especially for opposition parties. Boda-Boda rides remain one of the few situations in which open discussion and opposition advertising remain possible. An important reason for this can be found within the characteristics of the mobile Boda-Boda space. These spatial characteristics make it difficult to restrict free speech during the ride, while also encouraging spoken exchange.

The absolute Boda-Boda space provides the foundation for this. The size of the motorbike effectively limits the participation in any conversation to the rider and a passenger. The limited number of occupants stands in stark contrast to buses or shared taxis. Although they are also areas of public debate, taxis and buses usually allow several strangers to listen and participate in a discussion. The open structure of the motorbike, with its engine, the wind and other background noises, makes it difficult for others to listen to any talk on the move. These noises thus seal off the Boda-Boda space. They also make recording during the ride almost impossible, as attempts during the research have shown. Thus, the moving motorcycle space creates some privacy for conversations through its design characteristics. At the same time, the small seats and instability of a moving motorcycle allow for little else to be done by the rider and the customer while sharing the ride. This confirms the findings of te Brömmelstroet *et al.* who found that "enclosed space during travelling increases social interaction depth inside the vehicle" (2017, p. 10).

Looking at Boda-Boda space through the perspective of relative space further confirms this notion. The high relative speed with which the Boda-Boda moves through space and time isolates the mobile Boda-Boda space from its surroundings and excludes anyone not on the motorcycle from conversations taking place on it. The mobility of Boda-Bodas makes it difficult for even the police to apprehend Boda-Bodas, e.g. if they carry insignia of the opposition, as they can easily evade roadblocks and remain hard to track.

"You know, it is very difficult for us to say, that we want to have a rally in town. It is possible for a Boda-Boda who is loyal to us to have a one-on-one with passengers as they move. And for us, I think it beats some of the laws that are put with the intention of restraining our activities" ((21318KPM) Patrick Amuriat FDC president).

The relative position of the occupants on a motorbike also encourages open conversation. It puts the driver and the passenger in close proximity to each other while both are facing in the same direction. Through this arrangement, they cannot establish eye contact during the ride, which adds another layer of anonymity to the conversation, while the physical closeness encourages talk.

Through the relational lens, the mobile Boda-Boda space can be identified as deeply entrenched within the practices and livelihoods of Ugandan society. Strong discourses label it a politicised space and an opportunity for political conversation. This encourages passengers to engage in discussions and actively seek political advice from Boda-Boda riders. The relationship between the customer and the rider further increases the likelihood of political talk. Relations usually fall into one of two categories. Either the rider and his bike are well-known to the customer and selected for their trustworthiness and previous positive experiences, or the Boda-Boda is hailed randomly from the stage or roadside. The second case ensures almost complete anonymity between customer and rider. Most Boda-Bodas display few signs of their registration, and many are not registered. Likewise, the customer does not have to provide any identification when using the service. Especially in urban areas, the large numbers and rapid turnover of Boda-Boda riders make it unlikely that riders and customers will meet again if they do not do so deliberately. In either situation, both the rider and the customer will perceive the moving Boda-Boda space as an open environment for any kind of discussion.

The use of the different spatial lenses shows that Boda-Boda space enables political talk within it. Like space itself, the factors contributing to this are complex and multidimensional and those listed here are in no way conclusive. Nevertheless, using Harvey's spatial lenses provides the first insights into this complexity. Their use reveals that absolute, relative and relational elements of the Boda-Boda space interact and complement each other in designing a small publicly accessible space that is then closed

off through mobility to create an intimate and safe space for political discussion. The broad availability of Boda-Boda riders and their politicisation further ensure that this opportunity is used often.

6. What keeps the Space open?

The existence of free political talk on Boda-Bodas raises the question of why the repressive Ugandan government continues to tolerate it. Is it unable to close the Boda-Boda space for political debate, or is it just not relevant enough? The different strategies the government has previously used when attempting to close the space indicate the former. Most strategies tried to win the loyalty of riders and assert control over their bodies of self-regulation. Repeatedly, NRM and government bodies attempted to unite Boda-Boda riders under a single association loyal to the party. However, the largest of these associations, the so-called "Boda 2010" group (Goodfellow and Mukwaya 2021, p. 30) had to be disbanded after theft, murder and extortion by its members led to a public outcry. Recently, decentralized "movement associations" and the NRM-sponsored "Muhoozi Project Boda-Boda" have emerged as the result of renewed efforts to build party-associated structures within the sector. Even associations that are not openly linked to the NRM party have come under considerable pressure to elect NRM sympathizers into leadership positions (Doherty 2017, p. 196) and only in a few cases did the research find Boda-Boda leaders openly declaring their support for the opposition. To win the hearts and minds of the majority of riders, President Museveni has also granted extensive political patronage to the Boda-Boda sector. For years, his government has effectively prevented the registration and taxation of motorcycle taxis (Goodfellow 2015). Labelled "Bodanomics" (Daily Monitor 2022a), this patronage gives Boda-Bodas a considerable economic advantage over other

transporters. The strategy is often seen as a way to use the motorcycle taxi sector as a valve to depressurize the labour market and subdue more serious social unrest. As a result, the government has to carefully calculate their efforts when implementing unpopular regulatory measures such as formalization and regulation.

Despite some efforts, state control over the Boda-Boda space therefore remains limited. Regardless of political patronage, many riders perceive themselves as marginalized and their profession as a temporary stopgap (Mukwaya *et al.* 2022, p. 22). They frequently accuse the government of failing to provide them with "proper jobs" and many sympathize with opposition parties (c.f. Doherty 2017, p. 196). Additionally, state actors, such as police and transport authorities are seen as repressive and a threat to the riders' economic freedoms. These factors make winning the hearts and minds of the Boda-Boda riders a difficult endeavour. Simultaneously, forceful measures to close down the Boda-Boda space to political talk are complicated and resource-intensive. Boda-Boda riders are known to be defiant and hard to access due to their mobility, which helps them to elude police and local authorities.

"The municipality decided to register all Boda-Bodas. […]. It caused all the fighting. They burnt vehicles and beat all [their] workers" ((114KKKL) Boda-Boda Rider Kampala).

A possible scenario in which freedom of speech on the move is effectively extinguished is illustrated by the case of neighbouring Rwanda. In Rwanda, where political debate is generally extremely restricted (c.f. Goodfellow 2015), tight regulative control stifles political debates even in the private environment of Boda-Boda space. Additionally, the enforcement of helmets can reduce the ability of riders and passengers to communicate and thus affect the number and quality of talks. Finally, a general depoliticization of Boda-Bodas in practice and popular discourse might also reduce their role as a space for political conversations. This would include limiting the role of Boda-Bodas during

political campaigns and, probably, deconstructing narratives of Boda-Bodas as a space for political free speech.

Opposition actors have, however, equally internalized the opportunities of the mobile Boda-Boda space. During the research, both major opposition parties acknowledged their use of Boda-Bodas as transmitters of political messages and gatherers of public opinion. While the networks of the FDC party remain diffuse in order to protect the riders from state repression, the NUP party established a group of riders called "Freedom Boda" that advertises their agenda and publicly displays party insignia. As opposition parties use Boda-Bodas to distribute their agenda, they are eager to preserve them as a space for free political speech. Their efforts to draw riders to their side also counter those of the government and solidify the position of the Boda-Bodas as a space for different political opinions.

Currently, no political side has the power to open the black box of Boda-Boda space. This makes it difficult to influence or restrict talk happening within it. While it presents a challenge to political actors, it ensures the persistence of Boda-Bodas as a space for free political debate. In the near future, this situation is therefore unlikely to change. App-based ride-hailing which promises increased regulation of the sector has stagnated (Courtright 2023) and the number of riders continues to rise. Furthermore, the attitude of the government towards the Boda-Boda sector has not changed significantly under Museveni's rule. The technicalities of the mobile Boda-Boda space, together with the political and economic setting of Uganda, therefore stabilize the back of Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis as a bastion of free political debate in the country.

7. Conclusion

"*There is no law that stops somebody from talking to somebody while they are getting a lift" (210318 (K) FDC President Patrick Amuriat).*

"Boda-Boda they are people also. Each one has rights, and they have individual issues. […] Those ones who are supporting the opposition they support the opposition. You can't refuse them to support the opposition. Of course, it is free talk" ((9418KLG) Boda-Boda rider Kampala.

Despite being enshrined in the constitution, political freedom of expression is widely restricted in Uganda. One location at which political talk is still possible is the backs of Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis. This article examined why and how Boda-Bodas continue to enable free political speech. To do so, it draws on David Harvey's tripartite concept of space and adapts it for use on mobile spaces. Using the lenses of absolute, relative and relational space shows how material environments, tempo-spatial relocations and social embeddedness could be used to examine mobile spaces from a more holistic perspective.

Based on this, the article steps beyond the theoretical assessment of mobile spaces and reviews Boda-Boda motorcycle taxis as spaces of free speech. The empirical data shows that their design and their mobile practices make motorcycle taxis a favourable location for conversations. Together they limit the number of occupants and detach them from the environment through motion. The physical closeness between driver and passenger further encourages conversation, while they do not have to make eye contact. As the motorcycle sets the stage, the constant use of Boda-Bodas for political campaigns in Uganda, and their reputation as a politically knowledgeable group, charges the space politically and politicises talk.

The specific character of the small mobile Boda-Boda space also sets it apart from other mobile spaces such as shared taxis and enables unrestricted political discussion. The space itself nevertheless remains a stage for lived interaction and social attributions without which it would remain meaningless. Although Boda-Bodas provide spaces for free speech, they only do so because their characteristics

match the requirements and practices of the social setting in Uganda. This includes the need for motorcycle taxis and the popular demand for free spaces, but also the limitations for political actors to restrict the Boda-Boda space.

For now, the Boda-Boda space remains a contested black box. While citizens take the opportunity to inform themselves about political news, political parties try to influence the Boda-Boda space to distribute their agenda and gather information. Despite various attempts, the ruling NRM party has not been able to close the Boda-Boda space to the opposition. This has forced them to mimic the strategies of their rivals. All political sides now seek to win the favour of Boda-Boda riders in the hope that the riders transmit their political message to their customers. However, the attempt to empirically comprehend the functionality of the Boda-Boda space has confronted the research with similar challenges. Interviews and participant observations can only provide a technical understanding of its mechanisms, while the documentation of its practical use remains difficult. Although this complicates data collection, it also protects the Boda-Boda space from being closed off by any political side. Ultimately, Boda-Boda space remains closed to anyone but those within it and also remains a safe space for political talk in Uganda.

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Data Availability Statement

Data is available on request from the author. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restriction

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English Abstract

Riding on one of Uganda's countless motorcycle cabs, also known as boda-bodas, offers the almost always male drivers and their passengers a rare opportunity for political conversations beyond state and social control. However, for researchers, the events in such small mobile spaces (SMS) are a challenge as well. The limited space makes it difficult for them to be present on the bike, or to keep up with the mobility of the motorcycle. This chapter describes how mobile methods can help to gain access to such SMSs and the social interactions taking place within them. It discusses the use of ride-alongs and mobile participant observation as examples. The case study on Boda-Bodas in Uganda also shows the advantages of combining mobile and non-mobile methods.

Kleine Mobile Räume qualitativ erfassen

Ride-Alongs und mobile teilnehmende Beobachtungen bei Motorradtaxifahrten

Carsten Müller

Schlagworte

Mobilität, Stadtverkehr, Boda-Bodas, Uganda

Abstract

Die Fahrt mit einer der zahllosen Motorradtaxen Ugandas, auch Boda-Bodas genannt, bietet den fast immer männlichen Fahrern und ihren Passagier*innen eine seltene Gelegenheit für politische Gespräche jenseits staatlicher und sozialer Kontrolle. Für die Forschung sind die Geschehnisse in solchen kleinen mobilen Räumen (KMR) jedoch eine Herausforderung. Der begrenzte Raum erschwert die Anwesenheit Forschender, die zusätzlich mit der Mobilität des Motorrades mithalten müssen. Dieses Kapitel beschreibt, wie mobile Methoden helfen können, den Zugang zu derartigen KMR und ihren sozialen Dynamiken zu erhalten. Dabei wird beispielhaft der Einsatz von Ride-Alongs und mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung diskutiert. Die Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas in Uganda zeigt außerdem die Vorteile der Kombination von mobilen und nicht-mobilen Methoden.

1. Kleine Mobile Räume

Motorradtaxen, auch Boda-Bodas genannt, sind eines der wichtigsten Transportmittel in Uganda. Eine Beschäftigung als Fahrer zählen für junge Männer zu den am weitesten verbreiteten Berufen, während Fahrerinnen nahezu unbekannt sind. Aufgrund ihrer Bedeutung haben Boda-Bodas in der Vergangenheit umfangreiche wissenschaftliche Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. Zahlreiche Publikationen beschäftigen sich mit den ökonomischen (Venter, Molomo und Mashiri 2014), politischen (Goodfellow 2015) und medizinischen Herausforderungen der Motorradtaxen (Vaca et al. 2020) sowie ihrem infrastrukturellen Umfeld (Spooner et al. 2020). Bisherige Forschungen zu Boda-Bodas nutzen nahezu ausschließlich stationäre Interviews zur Datenerhebung (Evans, O'Brien und Ch Ng 2018; Mallett et al. 2022;

Siya et al. 2019). Dieses Kapitel widmet sich daher der Erforschung von Boda-Bodas während ihrer Fahrten mittels mobiler Methoden. Dabei wird diskutiert, wie diese Methoden eingesetzt werden und wie sie helfen können, bisher verdeckte soziale und politischer Prozesse in kleinen mobilen Räumen aufzudecken.
Als Kleine Mobile Räume, kurz KMR, bilden die fahrenden Boda-Bodas den Bezugspunkt für den Einsatz der mobilen Methoden. Sie lassen sich durch ihre Kleinheit bei gleichzeitig hoher Mobilität definieren. Kleinheit ist hier jedoch nicht als feststehende, absolute Ausdehnung zu verstehen, sondern beschreibt vielmehr eine räumliche Beschaffenheit, die die Ko-Präsenz Forschender durch mangelnden physischen oder sozialen Zugang eingeschränkt. Dies erschwert die Erforschung von KMR und erfordert methodische Anpassungen. Auch die physische und praktische Mobilität sowie Diskurse über die Mobilität (Cresswell 2010) der KMR wirken sich auf die Wahl der Methoden aus, die sich zu ihrer Erforschung eignen. Mobile Methoden sind bereits auf raumzeitliche Verschiebungen in den Untersuchungsräumen ausgerichtet und können somit zu einem besseren Verständnis von KMR beitragen (Manderscheid 2019, S. 1363).
Die Kleinheit und Mobilität von KMR sorgt jedoch auch beim Einsatz mobiler Methoden für erschwerte Bedingungen. Gleichzeitig können KMR gerade aufgrund ihrer Unzugänglichkeit für Außenstehende einen geschützten Raum darstellen und auf diese Weise zu Schauplätzen sowie Erhebungsorten von schwer zugänglichen sozialen Prozessen werden (vgl. The Roestone Collective 2014).
Eine Reihe von Publikationen weist auf eine Vielzahl von KMR hin: Neben Boda-Bodas sind Aufzüge (Subotticki und Sørensen 2021), PKWs (Ettema et al. 2012) oder Achterbahnen (Cardell 2015) nur einige Beispiele, in denen KMR bereits erforscht wurden. Demgegenüber zeigt das Beispiel der Boda-Bodas, wie mobile Methoden unter erschwerten Bedingungen eingesetzt werden können.

2. Kleine Mobile Räume erforschen

Die methodischen Herausforderungen, die mit diesem Raumtypus einhergehen, ergeben sich aus dem translokalen Charakter sowie der Schwierigkeit, eine physische Ko-Präsenz von Forschenden und Handelnden zu realisieren. In der Praxis bedeutet dies, dass die Forschenden Zugang zum begrenzten Raum des KMR erhalten und gleichzeitig mit deren Mobilität mithalten müssen. Diese Prämisse ist keinesfalls trivial, denn „die Erforschung des Räumlichen gesellschaftlicher Phänomene [ist] wesentlich abhängig von der Position, die der/die Forschende dabei einnimmt" (Vilsmaier 2013, S. 288). Der Einsatz etablierter sozialwissenschaftlicher Methoden steht bei KMR daher vor grundlegenden Herausforderungen. So sind ruhige Orte, die sich für Interviews eignen, in KMR oft nicht gegeben. Zudem können Beobachtungen durch die hohe Geschwindigkeit und Frequenz raumzeitlicher Verschiebungen sowie die erschwerte Ko-Präsenz behindert werden. Ton- und Videoaufnahmen wiederum, können durch Geräusche oder Bewegungen in KMR unbrauchbar werden.
Vor diesem Hintergrund erweist sich der Einsatz mobiler Methoden als vorteilhaft, da sie bereits durch ihre grundlegende Ausrichtung die angesprochenen Herausforderungen in KMR adressieren. So sind mobile Methoden für die Erforschung translokaler Räume konzipiert, die dabei in vielen Fällen wenig Platz für die Forschenden bieten (Manderscheid 2019, S. 1361). Daher soll hier der methodische Zugang zu KMR mittels Ride-Alongs, mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung sowie dokumentierender Verfahren erläutert werden.
Ride-Alongs bezeichnen das von Interviews und teilnehmender Beobachtung geprägte Begleiten und Erleben mobiler Praktiken (vgl. Wilde 2023, S. 199). Tatsächlich erfüllt die Methode besonders durch die Prämisse der Ko-Mobilität und die kommentierte Rekonstruktion mobiler Praktiken wichtige Voraussetzungen für das Erfassen dieser Räume (vgl. Juschten und Preyer 2023, S. 3f.). Als Hindernis für den Einsatz von Ride-Alongs stellt sich jedoch die erschwerte Ko-Präsenz der Forschenden heraus. So kann im KMR schlicht kein Platz für Forschende vorhanden sein oder aber den Forschenden wird der Zugang, z. B. durch die Nutzer*innen, verwehrt.
Ist in einem KMR eine direkte Konversation nicht möglich, kann es vorteilhaft sein, eine mobile, teilnehmende Beobachtung einzusetzen (vgl. Scott 2020, S. 321). Diese ermöglicht eine dichte Beschreibung (Jiron 2011, S. 41) von Praktiken in KMR, die in geringerem Maße als beim Ride-Along von der forschenden Person beeinflusst wird, da sie dabei nicht durch aktive Gesprächsführung in die Praktik eingreift. Die Nutzung der mobilen teilnehmenden Beobachtung ist somit eine Reaktion auf die spezifischen Bedingungen im KMR. Gleiches gilt, wenn dokumentierende Verfahren wie Bild- und Tonaufnahmen (Waitt et al. 2021, S. 921) oder GPS-Tracking (Li, Ma und Wilson 2021) in KMR zum Einsatz kommen. Solche Methoden können selbst dann eingesetzt werden, wenn die Anwesenheit von Forschenden im KMR gänzlich unmöglich ist. Obwohl dabei das körperliche Erleben des KMR entfällt, bieten sie zusätzliche Möglichkeiten zur qualitativen Datenerhebung (Kaufmann und Bork-Hüffer 2021). So sind z. B. Remote Ride-Alongs mit Bild- und Tonübertragung, videogestützte Beobachtungen (vgl. Scott 2020, S. 324) oder die Begleitung mittels Drohnen denkbar (Garrett und Anderson 2018). Ein weiterer Vorteil der dokumentierenden Verfahren ist die

umfangreiche Generierung von Forschungsdaten in KMR. Während dokumentierende Verfahren somit zusätzliche Erhebungsmöglichkeiten bieten, zeigt sich dort besonders, dass KMR oft eine umfangreiche methodische Vorbereitung erforderlich machen. So müssen die, teilweise teuren, technischen Hilfsmittel, wie Drohnen oder GPS-Tracker, gekauft werden, während der Umgang mit den Geräten und die Auswertung der Daten oft zusätzlich erlernt werden muss (Kaufmann und Bork-Hüffer 2021, S. 319).
Trotz der Vorteile mobiler Methoden kann es hilfreich sein, diese mit stationären Methoden, wie z. B. Interviews oder Beobachtungen zu kombinieren. Durch ihren statischen Charakter bieten stationäre Methoden zwar oftmals keinen Zugang zu KMR, müssen jedoch weder den räumlichen noch den raumzeitlichen Beschränkungen im KMR Rechnung tragen. In der Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas ermöglichten stationäre Interviews im Vorfeld die Identifikation der Motorradtaxen als KMR und bildeten somit die Grundlage für den Einsatz mobiler Methoden. Zusätzlich eignen sich stationäre Methoden, um die, mit mobilen Methoden erhobenen Daten, zu reflektieren und kontrastieren. Wie ein solcher Einsatz von mobilen Methoden in KMR in der Praxis aussehen kann, soll im Weiteren anhand der Motorradtaxifahrer in Uganda beschrieben werden.

3. Motorradtaxen als Kleine Mobile Räume – Meinungsfreiheit für unterwegs

Als Beispiel für die Forschung in KMR mittels mobiler Methoden wird an dieser Stelle eine Feldstudie zur politischen Rolle von Motorradtaxifahrten in Uganda in den Jahren 2018 bis 2022 diskutiert (vgl. Müller und Doevenspeck 2023). Im Verlauf dieser Feldstudie wurden fahrende Boda-Bodas durch den Einsatz von Ride-Alongs als Orte politischer Meinungsfreiheit beschrieben.
Dank ihrer Mobilität können Boda-Bodas sowohl im ländlichen Raum als auch im stockenden Verkehr der ugandischen Städte operieren. Boda-Bodas sind zudem ein Beispiel für Kleine Mobile Räume. Sie besitzen eine geringe Ausdehnung im physischen Raum, in dem maximal vier, normalerweise aber nur zwei Personen Platz finden. Gleichzeitig sind sie sehr mobil und weisen eine hohe Frequenz, verhältnismäßig schneller, raumzeitlicher Veränderungen gegenüber ihrer Umgebung auf (vgl. Evans, O'Brien und Ch Ng 2018, S. 680). Dabei sind Boda-Boda-Fahrten wichtige Schauplätze des sozialen Austausches sowie politischer Unterhaltungen. Viele Interaktionen auf Motorradtaxen treten jedoch nur während des Kund*innentransports, also in mobilen Phasen, auf, was ihr Erfassen erschwert. Außerdem erlaubt der begrenzte Platz auf dem Motorrad normalerweise keine zusätzliche Anwesenheit durch Forschende.
Ziel der qualitativen und explorativen Feldstudie war es ursprünglich, verschiedene Formen der politischen Beteiligung der Boda-Boda-Fahrer durch stationäre Interviews und Beobachtungen zu erfassen. Im Verlauf der Forschung stellten sich dann besonders die fahrenden Motorräder als wichtige Orte der Meinungsfreiheit im politisch repressiven Umfeld Ugandas heraus. Der begrenzte Raum auf den Motorrädern und ihre hohe Mobilität machten es jedoch schwierig, diese Interaktionen mit den ursprünglich eingesetzten, stationären Methoden zu beschreiben. Aus diesem Grund waren methodische Anpassungen notwendig, die einen direkten Zugang zum KMR der Boda-Bodas ermöglichten.
Zu diesem Zweck wurden Ride-Alongs auf Boda-Bodas durchgeführt. Der Forscher nahm dabei die Rolle des Passagiers ein und initiierte ein Gespräch mit dem Fahrer, um die die alltäglichen Interaktionen zwischen Fahrer und Passagier*in zu simulieren. Obwohl während dieser Fahrten keine weiteren Passagier*innen anwesend waren und somit keine Beobachtung der eigentlichen Konversationen möglich war, erlaubten die Ride-Alongs ein Erleben der üblichen räumlichen und sozialen Beziehungen der Personen im KMR. Somit wurde eine Annäherung an die spezifischen Bedingungen des KMR eines Motorradtaxis möglich, der in den stationären Interviews zuvor als Ort für politische Konversationen benannt worden war.

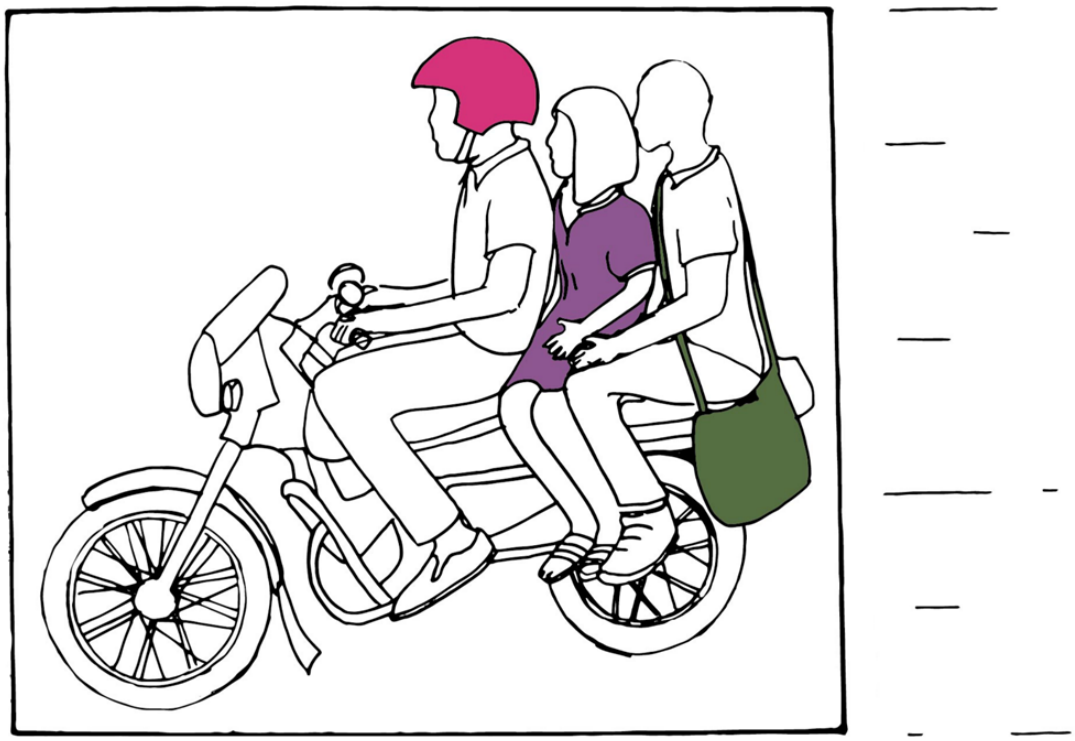

Abb. 01 Schematische Darstellung einer Mitfahrt auf einem Boda-Boda. Grafik: Elbie Kivilcim

Probleme bereitete jedoch die Dokumentation der Gespräche während der Fahrt. Tonaufnahmen waren aus zweierlei Gründen erschwert: Einerseits behinderte der KMR durch Fahrtwind, Straßenlärm und die verhältnismäßig leise geführten Gespräche viele Aufnahmeversuche, andererseits bedeuteten Aufnahmen eine Verletzung des KMR als geschützten Raum politischer Meinungsfreiheit (vgl. Koch 2013). Alternativ war auch das Niederschreiben von Notizen auf dem schmalen Sitz des schnellen und wackligen Motorrads kaum möglich. Stattdessen wurden wichtige Gesprächsinhalte im Nachhinein im Feldtagebuch dokumentiert. Trotz der methodischen Herausforderungen erwiesen sich die Mitfahrten als wichtige Methode, um ein Verständnis für den KMR als geschützten Gesprächsraum zu entwickeln. So ermöglichten sie es, die zuvor in stationären Interviews identifizierten KMR zu rekonstruieren und direkt zu beobachten. Dabei wurde ersichtlich, dass Boda-Boda-Fahrten als KMR ein hohes Maß an Anonymität gewährleisten, was sie zu temporären Orten politischer Meinungsfreiheit werden ließ. Zusätzlich traten während der Ride-Alongs Diskrepanzen zu den Beschreibungen des KMR in den stationären Interviews zutage. So erwiesen sich die Konversationen während der Fahrten meist als deutlich kürzer und teilweise weniger politisiert, als es die zuvor geführten stationären Interviews mit Fahrern und Politiker*innen hätten erwarten lassen. Dies war ebenfalls den Schwierigkeiten geschuldet, im Lärm des Straßenverkehrs sowie im herausfordernden Verkehrsgeschehen längere Gespräche zu führen. Zusätzlich zeigte sich, dass, das nicht immer übliche Tragen von Motorradhelmen das gegenseitige Verständnis und damit eine Konversation erschweren konnte. Während Ride-Alongs somit wichtige Impulse für die Erforschung von Boda-Bodas als Kleine Mobile Räume für politische Meinungsfreiheit in Uganda geben konnten, erwies sich in diesem Fall eine Kombination mit weiteren Methoden als notwendig. Ride-Alongs simulierten zwar die Mitfahrten im KMR des Motorrads, ließen jedoch keine Dokumentation der Gespräche zwischen Fahrer und anderen Passagieren zu. Sie waren daher auf eine Rekonstruktion der Bedingungen der untersuchten Prozesse beschränkt. Aus diesem Grund kamen parallel zu den Ride-Alongs auch stationäre Leitfadeninterviews mit Fahrern und Passagieren zum Einsatz. Dadurch wurde versucht, sich den komplexen Bedingungen innerhalb des KMR Boda-Boda, trotz ihrer Unzugänglichkeit, im Rahmen der begrenzten Möglichkeiten im Feld anzunähern. Einen ähnlichen Ansatz verfolgten parallel auch Nguyen und Turner (2023), die Motorradtaxifahrer*innen in Hanoi ebenfalls mittels Ride-Alongs und stationärer Interviews untersuchten.

4. Zusammenfassung

Kleine Mobile Räume, wie fahrende Boda-Boda Motorradtaxen, stellen Forschende vor zahlreiche Herausforderungen. Ihre Mobilität und ihre beschränkte Zugänglichkeit machen eine spezifische Vorbereitung notwendig. Mobile Methoden sind an die Herausforderungen von KMR angepasst und versprechen einen direkten Zugang zu KMR. So kann versucht werden, mittels Ride-Alongs, mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung oder durch technikgestützte Dokumentationen, wie z. B. durch GPS-Tracker oder Tonaufnahmen, einen Zugang zu den KMR zu erhalten. Gleichzeitig zeigt die Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas als Räume politischer Meinungsfreiheit in Uganda, dass mobile Methoden nicht immer allein eingesetzt werden können, beispielsweise, wenn in KMR eine Dokumentation von Gesprächen und Beobachtungen kaum möglich ist.

Um die jeweiligen Schwächen von stationären und mobilen Methoden auszugleichen, empfiehlt sich eine Kombination verschiedener Methoden. An der Fallstudie zeigt sich dabei beispielhaft, dass die angewandten Ride-Alongs für das Erleben und die Beschreibung der Motorradtaxifahrten als Räume politischer Meinungsfreiheit essentiell waren. Dennoch bedurfte es zusätzlich stationärer Interviews, um die Inhalte der sozialen Interaktionen innerhalb des KMR Motorradtaxi zu rekonstruieren.

Literaturtipp

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Mobilität, Stadtverkehr, Boda-Bodas, Uganda

Abstract
Die Fahrt mit einer der zahllosen Motorradtaxen Ugandas, auch Boda-Bodas genannt, bietet den fast immer männlichen Fahrern und ihren Passagier*innen eine seltene Gelegenheit für politische Gespräche jenseits staatlicher und sozialer Kontrolle. Für die Forschung sind die Geschehnisse in solchen kleinen mobilen Räumen (KMR) jedoch eine Herausforderung. Der begrenzte Raum erschwert die Anwesenheit Forschender, die zusätzlich mit der Mobilität des Motorrades mithalten müssen. Dieses Kapitel beschreibt, wie mobile Methoden helfen können, den Zugang zu derartigen KMR und ihren sozialen Dynamiken zu erhalten. Dabei wird beispielhaft der Einsatz von Ride-Alongs und mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung diskutiert. Die Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas in Uganda zeigt außerdem die Vorteile der Kombination von mobilen und nicht-mobilen Methoden.

1. Kleine Mobile Räume

Motorradtaxen, auch Boda-Bodas genannt, sind eines der wichtigsten Transportmittel in Uganda. Eine Beschäftigung als Fahrer zählen für junge Männer zu den am weitesten verbreiteten Berufen, während Fahrerinnen nahezu unbekannt sind. Aufgrund ihrer Bedeutung haben Boda-Bodas in der Vergangenheit umfangreiche wissenschaftliche Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. Zahlreiche Publikationen beschäftigen sich mit den ökonomischen (Venter, Molomo und Mashiri 2014), politischen (Goodfellow 2015) und medizinischen Herausforderungen der Motorradtaxen (Vaca et al. 2020) sowie ihrem infrastrukturellen Umfeld (Spooner et al. 2020). Bisherige Forschungen zu Boda-Bodas nutzen nahezu ausschließlich stationäre Interviews zur Datenerhebung (Evans, O'Brien und Ch Ng 2018; Mallett et al. 2022; Siya et al. 2019). Dieses Kapitel widmet sich daher der Erforschung von Boda-Bodas während ihrer Fahrten mittels mobiler Methoden. Dabei wird diskutiert, wie diese Methoden eingesetzt werden und wie sie helfen können, bisher verdeckte soziale und politischer Prozesse in kleinen mobilen Räumen aufzudecken.

Als Kleine Mobile Räume, kurz KMR, bilden die fahrenden Boda-Bodas den Bezugspunkt für den Einsatz der mobilen Methoden. Sie lassen sich durch ihre Kleinheit bei gleichzeitig hoher Mobilität definieren. Kleinheit ist hier jedoch nicht

als feststehende, absolute Ausdehnung zu verstehen, sondern beschreibt vielmehr eine räumliche Beschaffenheit, die die Ko-Präsenz Forschender durch mangelnden physischen oder sozialen Zugang eingeschränkt. Dies erschwert die Erforschung von KMR und erfordert methodische Anpassungen. Auch die physische und praktische Mobilität sowie Diskurse über die Mobilität (Cresswell 2010) der KMR wirken sich auf die Wahl der Methoden aus, die sich zu ihrer Erforschung eignen. Mobile Methoden sind bereits auf raumzeitliche Verschiebungen in den Untersuchungsräumen ausgerichtet und können somit zu einem besseren Verständnis von KMR beitragen (Manderscheid 2019, S. 1363).
Die Kleinheit und Mobilität von KMR sorgt jedoch auch beim Einsatz mobiler Methoden für erschwerte Bedingungen. Gleichzeitig können KMR gerade aufgrund ihrer Unzugänglichkeit für Außenstehende einen geschützten Raum darstellen und auf diese Weise zu Schauplätzen sowie Erhebungsorten von schwer zugänglichen sozialen Prozessen werden (vgl. The Roestone Collective 2014).
Eine Reihe von Publikationen weist auf eine Vielzahl von KMR hin: Neben Boda-Bodas sind Aufzüge (Suboticki und Sørensen 2021), PKWs (Ettema et al. 2012) oder Achterbahnen (Cardell 2015) nur einige Beispiele, in denen KMR bereits erforscht wurden. Demgegenüber zeigt das Beispiel der Boda-Bodas, wie mobile Methoden unter erschwerten Bedingungen eingesetzt werden können.

2. Kleine Mobile Räume erforschen

Die methodischen Herausforderungen, die mit diesem Raumtypus einhergehen, ergeben sich aus dem translokalen Charakter sowie der Schwierigkeit, eine physische Ko-Präsenz von Forschenden und Handelnden zu realisieren. In der Praxis bedeutet dies, dass die Forschenden Zugang zum begrenzten Raum des KMR erhalten und gleichzeitig mit deren Mobilität mithalten müssen. Diese Prämisse ist keinesfalls trivial, denn „die Erforschung des Räumlichen gesellschaftlicher Phänomene [ist] wesentlich abhängig von der Position, die der/die Forschende dabei einnimmt“ (Vilsmaier 2013, S. 288). Der Einsatz etablierter sozialwissenschaftlicher Methoden steht bei KMR daher vor grundlegenden Herausforderungen. So sind ruhige Orte, die sich für Interviews eignen, in KMR oft nicht gegeben. Zudem können Beobachtungen durch die hohe Geschwindigkeit und Frequenz raumzeitlicher Verschiebungen sowie die erschwerte Ko-Präsenz behindert werden. Ton- und Videoaufnahmen wiederum, können durch Geräusche oder Bewegungen in KMR unbrauchbar werden.
Vor diesem Hintergrund erweist sich der Einsatz mobiler Methoden als vorteilhaft, da sie bereits durch ihre grundlegende Ausrichtung die angesprochenen Herausforderungen in KMR adressieren. So sind mobile Methoden für die Erforschung translokaler Räume konzipiert, die dabei in vielen Fällen wenig Platz für die Forschenden bieten (Manderscheid 2019, S. 1361). Daher soll hier der methodische Zugang zu KMR mittels Ride-Alongs, mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung sowie dokumentierender Verfahren erläutert werden.
Ride-Alongs bezeichnen das von Interviews und teilnehmender Beobachtung geprägte Begleiten und Erleben mobiler Praktiken (vgl. Wilde 2023, S. 199). Tatsächlich erfüllt die Methode besonders durch die Prämisse der Ko-Mobilität und die kommentierte Rekonstruktion mobiler Praktiken wichtige Voraussetzungen für das Erfassen dieser Räume (vgl. Juschten und Preyer 2023, S. 3f.). Als Hindernis für den Einsatz von Ride-Alongs stellt sich jedoch die erschwerte Ko-Präsenz der Forschenden heraus. So kann im KMR schlicht kein Platz für Forschende vorhanden sein oder aber den Forschenden wird der Zugang, z. B. durch die Nutzer*innen, verwehrt.
Ist in einem KMR eine direkte Konversation nicht möglich, kann es vorteilhaft sein, eine mobile, teilnehmende Beobachtung einzusetzen (vgl. Scott 2020, S. 321). Diese ermöglicht eine dichte Beschreibung (Jiron 2011, S. 41) von Praktiken in KMR, die in geringerem Maße als beim Ride-Along von der forschenden Person beeinflusst wird, da sie dabei nicht durch aktive Gesprächsführung in die Praktik eingreift. Die Nutzung der mobilen teilnehmenden Beobachtung ist somit eine Reaktion auf die spezifischen Bedingungen im KMR. Gleiches gilt, wenn dokumentierende Verfahren wie Bild- und Tonaufnahmen (Waitt et al. 2021, S. 921) oder GPS-Tracking (Li, Ma und Wilson 2021) in KMR zum Einsatz kommen. Solche Methoden können selbst dann eingesetzt werden, wenn die Anwesenheit von Forschenden im KMR gänzlich unmöglich ist. Obwohl dabei das körperliche Erleben des KMR entfällt, bieten sie zusätzliche Möglichkeiten zur qualitativen Datenerhebung (Kaufmann und Bork-Hüffer 2021). So sind z. B. Remote Ride-Alongs mit Bild- und Tonübertragung, videogestützte Beobachtungen (vgl. Scott 2020, S. 324) oder die Begleitung mittels Drohnen denkbar (Garrett und Anderson 2018). Ein weiterer Vorteil der dokumentierenden Verfahren ist die umfangreiche Generierung von Forschungsdaten in KMR. Während dokumentierende Verfahren somit zusätzliche Erhebungsmöglichkeiten bieten, zeigt sich dort besonders, dass KMR oft eine umfangreiche methodische Vorbereitung erforderlich machen. So müssen die, teilweise teuren, technischen Hilfsmittel, wie Drohnen oder GPS-Tracker, gekauft werden, während der Umgang mit den Geräten und die Auswertung der Daten oft zusätzlich erlernt werden muss (Kaufmann und Bork-Hüffer 2021, S. 319).

Trotz der Vorteile mobiler Methoden kann es hilfreich sein, diese mit stationären Methoden, wie z. B. Interviews oder Beobachtungen zu kombinieren. Durch ihren statischen Charakter bieten stationäre Methoden zwar oftmals keinen Zugang zu KMR, müssen jedoch weder den räumlichen noch den raumzeitlichen Beschränkungen im KMR Rechnung tragen. In der Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas ermöglichten stationäre Interviews im Vorfeld die Identifikation der Motorradtaxen als KMR und bildeten somit die Grundlage für den Einsatz mobiler Methoden. Zusätzlich eignen sich stationäre Methoden, um die, mit mobilen Methoden erhobenen Daten, zu reflektieren und kontrastieren. Wie ein solcher Einsatz von mobilen Methoden in KMR in der Praxis aussehen kann, soll im Weiteren anhand der Motorradtaxifahrer in Uganda beschrieben werden.

3. Motorradtaxen als Kleine Mobile Räume – Meinungsfreiheit für unterwegs

Als Beispiel für die Forschung in KMR mittels mobiler Methoden wird an dieser Stelle eine Feldstudie zur politischen Rolle von Motorradtaxifahrten in Uganda in den Jahren 2018 bis 2022 diskutiert (vgl. Müller und Doevenspeck 2023). Im Verlauf dieser Feldstudie wurden fahrende Boda-Bodas durch den Einsatz von Ride-Alongs als Orte politischer Meinungsfreiheit beschrieben.

Dank ihrer Mobilität können Boda-Bodas sowohl im ländlichen Raum als auch im stockenden Verkehr der ugandischen Städte operieren. Boda-Bodas sind zudem ein Beispiel für Kleine Mobile Räume. Sie besitzen eine geringe Ausdehnung im physischen Raum, in dem maximal vier, normalerweise aber nur zwei Personen Platz finden. Gleichzeitig sind sie sehr mobil und weisen eine hohe Frequenz, verhältnismäßig schneller, raumzeitlicher Veränderungen gegenüber ihrer Umgebung auf (vgl. Evans, O'Brien und Ch Ng 2018, S. 680). Dabei sind Boda-Boda-Fahrten wichtige Schauplätze des sozialen Austausches sowie politischer Unterhaltungen. Viele Interaktionen auf Motorradtaxen treten jedoch nur während des Kund*innentransports, also in mobilen Phasen, auf, was ihr Erfassen erschwert. Außerdem erlaubt der begrenzte Platz auf dem Motorrad normalerweise keine zusätzliche Anwesenheit durch Forschende.

Ziel der qualitativen und explorativen Feldstudie war es ursprünglich, verschiedene Formen der politischen Beteiligung der Boda-Boda-Fahrer durch stationäre Interviews und Beobachtungen zu erfassen. Im Verlauf der Forschung stellten sich dann besonders die fahrenden Motorräder als wichtige Orte der Meinungsfreiheit im politisch repressiven Umfeld Ugandas heraus. Der begrenzte Raum auf den Motorrädern und ihre hohe Mobilität machten es jedoch schwierig, diese Interaktionen mit den ursprünglich eingesetzten, stationären Methoden zu beschreiben. Aus diesem Grund waren methodische Anpassungen notwendig, die einen direkten Zugang zum KMR der Boda-Bodas ermöglichten.

Zu diesem Zweck wurden Ride-Alongs auf Boda-Bodas durchgeführt. Der Forscher nahm dabei die Rolle des Passagiers ein und initiierte ein Gespräch mit dem Fahrer, um die die alltäglichen Interaktionen zwischen Fahrer und Passagier*in zu simulieren. Obwohl während dieser Fahrten keine weiteren Passagier*innen anwesend waren und somit keine Beobachtung der eigentlichen Konversationen möglich war, erlaubten die Ride-Alongs ein Erleben der üblichen räumlichen und sozialen Beziehungen der Personen im KMR. Somit wurde eine Annäherung an die spezifischen Bedingungen des KMR eines Motorradtaxis möglich, der in den stationären Interviews zuvor als Ort für politische Konversationen benannt worden war.

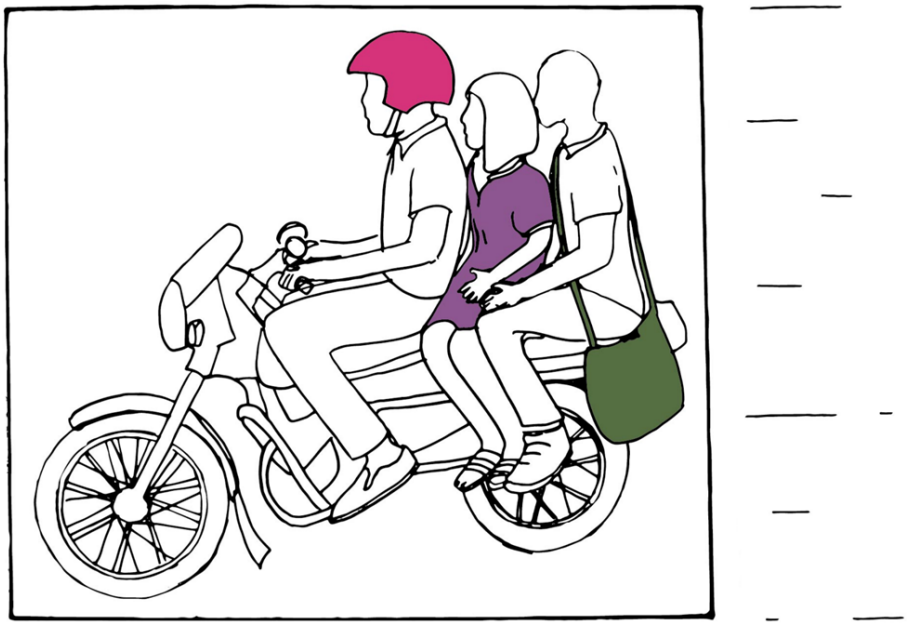

Abb. 01 Schematische Darstellung einer Mitfahrt auf einem Boda-Boda. Grafik: Elbie Kivilcim

Probleme bereitete jedoch die Dokumentation der Gespräche während der Fahrt. Tonaufnahmen waren aus zweierlei Gründen erschwert: Einerseits behinderte der KMR durch Fahrtwind, Straßenlärm und die verhältnismäßig leise geführten Gespräche viele Aufnahmeversuche, andererseits bedeuteten Aufnahmen eine Verletzung des KMR als geschützten Raum politischer Meinungsfreiheit (vgl. Koch 2013). Alternativ war auch das Niederschreiben von Notizen auf dem schmalen Sitz des schnellen und wackligen Motorrads kaum möglich. Stattdessen wurden wichtige Gesprächsinhalte im Nachhinein im Feldtagebuch dokumentiert. Trotz der methodischen Herausforderungen erwiesen sich die Mitfahrten als wichtige Methode, um ein Verständnis für den KMR als geschützten Gesprächsraum zu entwickeln. So ermöglichten sie es, die zuvor in stationären Interviews identifizierten KMR zu rekonstruieren und direkt zu beobachten. Dabei wurde ersichtlich, dass Boda-Boda-Fahrten als KMR ein hohes Maß an Anonymität gewährleisten, was sie zu temporären Orten politischer Meinungsfreiheit werden ließ. Zusätzlich traten während der Ride-Alongs Diskrepanzen zu den Beschreibungen des KMR in den stationären Interviews zutage. So erwiesen sich die Konversationen während der Fahrten meist als deutlich kürzer und teilweise weniger politisiert, als es die zuvor geführten stationären Interviews mit Fahrern und Politiker*innen hätten erwarten lassen. Dies war ebenfalls den Schwierigkeiten geschuldet, im Lärm des Straßenverkehrs sowie im herausfordernden Verkehrsgeschehen längere Gespräche zu führen. Zusätzlich zeigte sich, dass, das nicht immer übliche Tragen von Motorradhelmen das gegenseitige Verständnis und damit eine Konversation erschweren konnte. Während Ride-Alongs somit wichtige Impulse für die Erforschung von Boda-Bodas als Kleine Mobile Räume für politische Meinungsfreiheit in Uganda geben konnten, erwies sich in diesem Fall eine Kombination mit weiteren Methoden als notwendig. Ride-Alongs simulierten zwar die Mitfahrten im KMR des Motorrads, ließen jedoch keine Dokumentation der Gespräche zwischen Fahrer und anderen Passagieren zu. Sie waren daher auf eine Rekonstruktion der Bedingungen der untersuchten Prozesse beschränkt. Aus diesem Grund kamen parallel zu den Ride-Alongs auch stationäre Leitfadeninterviews mit Fahrern und Passagieren zum Einsatz. Dadurch wurde versucht, sich den komplexen Bedingungen innerhalb des KMR Boda-Boda, trotz ihrer Unzugänglichkeit, im Rahmen der begrenzten Möglichkeiten im Feld anzunähern. Einen ähnlichen Ansatz verfolgten parallel auch Nguyen und Turner (2023), die Motorradtaxifahrer*innen in Hanoi ebenfalls mittels Ride-Alongs und stationärer Interviews untersuchten.

4. Zusammenfassung

Kleine Mobile Räume, wie fahrende Boda-Boda Motorradtaxen, stellen Forschende vor zahlreiche Herausforderungen. Ihre Mobilität und ihre beschränkte Zugänglichkeit machen eine spezifische Vorbereitung notwendig. Mobile Methoden

sind an die Herausforderungen von KMR angepasst und versprechen einen direkten Zugang zu KMR. So kann versucht werden, mittels Ride-Alongs, mobiler teilnehmender Beobachtung oder durch technikgestützte Dokumentationen, wie z. B. durch GPS-Tracker oder Tonaufnahmen, einen Zugang zu den KMR zu erhalten. Gleichzeitig zeigt die Fallstudie zu Boda-Bodas als Räume politischer Meinungsfreiheit in Uganda, dass mobile Methoden nicht immer allein eingesetzt werden können, beispielsweise, wenn in KMR eine Dokumentation von Gesprächen und Beobachtungen kaum möglich ist.
Um die jeweiligen Schwächen von stationären und mobilen Methoden auszugleichen, empfiehlt sich eine Kombination verschiedener Methoden. An der Fallstudie zeigt sich dabei beispielhaft, dass die angewandten Ride-Alongs für das Erleben und die Beschreibung der Motorradtaxifahrten als Räume politischer Meinungsfreiheit essentiell waren. Dennoch bedurfte es zusätzlich stationärer Interviews, um die Inhalte der sozialen Interaktionen innerhalb des KMR Motorradtaxi zu rekonstruieren.

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Einen Überblick über die Vielfältigkeit mobiler Räume und die verschiedenen Ansätze sie zu erforschen, bieten te Brömmelstroet et al. (2017).

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The New Ground Wars: Changing Ground Campaigns in Africa

Swiss army knives on wheels – Motorcycle taxi drivers as mobile campaign activists.

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1. Introduction

If the roads of Africa are battlefields, motorcycle taxi drivers are an elite force. Deployed in all kinds of rural and urban environments they provide crucial transport services under the most difficult conditions. Fending off hostile competitors and mastering rugged terrain, they can carry several people and heavy goods on their bikes. Unsurprisingly the group is seen as tough, fearless, and sometimes violent (Goodfellow & Mukwaya, 2021, p. 32).

The versatility, mobility, and constant availability of motorcycle taxi drivers have made them economically successful and an integral part of transport systems in many African countries (Ehebrecht et al., 2018). The same characteristics also gained them the attention of politicians and campaign strategists who attempt to deploy their abilities in their 'new ground wars' (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023; Oldenburg, 2019; Paget, 2023). Hired as mercenaries or mobilized as die-hard party supporters motorcycle taxi drivers can be found at the forefront of political campaigns. There they cheer at rallies, conduct outreaches, transport voters, and spearhead violent clashes with police and opposing sides.

As "*studies of political mobilisation in sub-Saharan Africa have focussed primarily on the messages that parties impart to voters*" (Paget, 2019) examining this potent weapon of mass mobilization sheds light on campaign activists as the often-ignored ground soldiers of political campaigns and their most important abilities.

To do so, the chapter examines and compares the use of motorcycle taxi drivers as political campaign activists in Uganda, Kenya, and eastern DR Congo. Referred to as Boda-Bodas in Uganda and Kenya and Motards in the DRC they frequently engage in political campaigns within all three countries. In order to analyze and compare them the chapter uses original empirical data collected in all settings between 2018 and 2022, including observations during the 2021 and 2022 general elections in Uganda and Kenya respectively (c.f. Müller, 2024; Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023).

In three steps, it investigates the underlying conditions and potentials for their recruitment, the strategies they execute when politically mobilized, as well as the impact of their activism on campaigns, the economy, and social systems.

In the first part, the chapter outlines the potentials of motorcycle taxi drivers as campaign activists across different settings. It finds them within their motorcycle-based mobility, their professional social networks, and their constant availability for spontaneous employment. Despite generally large potentials, stark discrepancies regarding the levels of mobilization across the different settings are also visible.

Based on this, the second part highlights the use of motorcycle taxi drivers as activists within ground campaigns. It examines the processes of mobilization and the linkages between political actors and motorcyclists and outlines the most widespread and important campaign strategies.

The last part reflects on the implications of motorcycle-powered campaigns on the political, economic, and social environment they operate in. This includes shifts in expenditure flows, campaign designs, and the recruitment of activists, but also the impacts of the political involvement of motorcyclists on their profession and the public transport sector in general.

2. Mobile Potentials

Although ground campaigns in Africa have received much attention, Political mobilization in Africa is often examined from the perspective of politicians (c.f. Krönke et al., 2022; Paget, 2019, p. 2). In contrast, political activists and the reasons why they participate in campaigns are often neglected, as they are perceived to be mostly dormant in between elections (Bob-Milliar, 2012, p. 680). This is not different for motorcycle-powered activists, whose political participation is frequently mentioned (Nyairo, 2023; Philipps & Kagoro, 2016; Titeca, 2014) but rarely examined thoroughly. However, motorcyclists are neither recruited randomly nor do they have the same abilities as other potential activist groups. Politicians recruit strategically (Abramson & Claggett, 2001, p. 907), and tend to select those they see as most effective but also those who are most easily mobilized. Having the largest potentials to execute campaign strategies is thus a prerequisite for political activists, especially if political actors recruit them actively. The continuous participation of motorcyclists in political campaigns across different countries makes the existence of substantial and group-specific potentials plausible. But what makes motorcycle drivers effective activists? What are their potentials and what differentiates them from other activist groups?

While some publications highlight ethnic and religious affiliation as the most important factors for political mobilization in Africa (Koter, 2023; Nathan, 2016; van Wyk, 2018, p. 493), motorcycle taxi drivers are ethnically and religiously diverse, and mobilized by politicians with equally diverse backgrounds. Instead, the reasons for their mobilization can be found in the profession-specific characteristics, which they share across different settings. Political "*Motorcycle taxi activity is thus based on the ability of the actors to link different repertoires of status, action and interaction*" (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020, p. 12).

Thus, what sets motorcycle drivers apart from other potential and actual activist groups, like the marked vendors mentioned by Titeca (2014), are their motorcycle-powered mobilities and their professional social networks (c.f. Müller, 2024).

2.1. Mobility

"[Politicians] Prefer the Boda-Boda because Boda-Boda is flexible. They can reach anywhere" (Motorcycle taxi rider, Kisumu).

Making people mobile for political purposes (Tilly, 1978, p. 11), is the literal goal of political mobilization. The notion, that high mobility is the preferred state for political activists, is reflected in both the theoretical literature on the topic (e.g. Bærenholdt, 2013) and works on campaigns in Africa (Paget, 2022, p. 227). In Kenya for example "*over 80% of [party primary] candidates […] revealed that they spent the most on publicity and transport costs"* (Kanyinga & Mboya, 2021, p. 37). The increasing need for mobility within the ever-modernizing

political campaigns in Africa (Paget, 2020) leaves politicians in search of supporters who can keep up or increase the speed and frequency of the activities and the politicians themselves. Thereby, mobility is not only required to execute established campaign strategies but becomes an essential "technique of mobilization" (Sopranzetti, 2014, p. 123). Due to their access to motorbikes, motorcycle taxi drivers are generally rich in mobile capital (c.f. Kaufmann et al., 2004) and able to satisfy this demand. When closely examined, their mobile capabilities extend across different dimensions of mobility and include physical movements, mobile practices, and associated discourses about their mobility (c.f. Cresswell, 2010). Being able to get from A to B can be anything but easy in the muddy hinterlands of South Kivu, or the crammed roads of rush hour Kampala. Motorcycle taxi riders can deploy their bike in these challenging settings and become able to physically move to places and at speeds unavailable to buses, bicycles, or private cars. Thereby, they use the advanced navigation and bike handling skills they have acquired over their professional lives. Group-specific mobile practices also enable them to climb steep hills with ease or to use even the smallest alleys if it means reaching the destination faster. Their reputation as quick fixes and other discourses surrounding their mobility further strengthen their mobility (Oldenburg, 2019, p. 66). Motorcycle taxi drivers are regarded as skilled but aggressive drivers and other road users often prefer to make way, instead of risking an accident. This eases movements and makes motorcyclists even more mobile. Additionally, they routinely defy traffic laws and use their misconduct to shorten their paths and gain mobility. This high individual mobility is a common feature of motorcycle taxi drivers across all three examined settings and beyond (Agbiboa, 2019; Sopranzetti, 2014). Furthermore, it is critically reflected in the ways, they are mobilized during campaigns.

2.2. Social networks

Taxi work depends on constant movements. However, being a successful taxi driver also builds on professional social networks with peers and customers. Such networks can prove equally important for political mobilization as politicians are not able to build and maintain the far-flung social networks necessary to distribute political messages effectively during campaigns (Brierley & Nathan, 2021, p. 889; Lockwood, 2022, p. 629). This makes social capital a valuable attribute to potential political activists (c.f. Cox et al., 1998, p. 448). Furthermore, social networks are an important precondition to human movement (Manderscheid, 2012, p. 557). Thus, the professional and private social networks of motorcycle taxi riders are a valuable resource for politicians engaging in election campaigns. The professional networks of motorcycle taxi riders consist of the multiple ties with their customers as well as ties to their colleagues and their professional associations and unions (Kouassi et al., 2022, p. 1306). Customers either hail motorcycles randomly or have become regular customers of particular riders. Combined the random and regular engagements create a social network of weak and strong ties, that builds the foundation of the professional livelihood of motorcycle taxi riders. During campaigns, these ties can be used to distribute and gather information and generally forward a political agenda. Additional professional social networks exist between the riders themselves. The strongest of them are

found among riders operating from the same location (Doherty, 2022) but some extend to the members of larger professional associations and often to all colleagues (Doherty, 2017, p. 203). While these peer networks can also forward information, they are more frequently used as channels for the mobilization of motorcycle taxis. They also create a sense of solidarity amongst the riders and thus strengthen the resolve of motorcycle groups, frequently utilized during the political struggle (Nyairo, 2023, p. 115). On top of the professional networks, private networks of individual riders further increase the reach of their mobilization capabilities. Due to the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of riders, these networks extend across age groups and ethnic or religious divides.

Combined, social networks and mobility are essential to their success as transport providers and make up the powerful political capital of motorcycle taxi riders (Diaz Olvera et al., 2020, p. 6). During political campaigns, political actors mobilize these established potentials for their political goals. One reason why they are able to do so is the constant availability of motorcycle taxis. Unlike other professional groups that would have to leave their place of work, motorcycle taxi riders are usually awaiting customers and mobile enough to be deployed wherever needed.

In addition to these potentials, gender is a further important factor in how motorcycle taxis are mobilized. In all three countries, being a motorcycle taxi driver is considered a tough job suitable only for young men (Nabifo et al., 2021, p. 3; Spooner et al., 2020, p. 54). The strenuous and dangerous working conditions are widely seen as unfitting for women, who are consequently mostly absent from the workforce (Mensah et al., 2023; Nyairo, 2023, p. 110). Their demographic characteristics and the discourses linked to being a young man such as courage, noisiness, violent behaviour, and the ability to endure physically demanding labour (Oldenburg, 2018, p. 260) are reflected in their political mobilization. However, motorcyclists are not the only professional group comprised mainly of young men. While this is no distinctive features of motorcycle taxi drivers, their demographics thus influence their mobilization nevertheless.

The characteristic potentials form the basis for the deployment of motorcycle taxis within ground campaigns in Africa. They also allow them to execute diverse tasks that make them Swiss army knives in the hands of political actors who use them in various areas of political competition.

3. Motorcyclist and political campaigns

While motorcycle taxis in Kenya, Uganda, and the DR Congo possess powerful potentials for political participation, this does not always lead to their political deployment. Recruitment strategies play an important role in determining who is mobilized, what strategies are executed, and which potentials are ultimately deployed.

3.1. Recruitment and mobilisation

The recruitment of motorcycle taxi riders for political participation usually takes advantage of their professional networks. This means that politicians or their campaign strategists approach them either directly at their workplace or through their professional associations.

"*Sometimes [politicians] approach, the county office […] and tell us that we need maybe 200 motorbike operators for a rally. For a roadshow for an MP or an MCA, or wherever. Then because we have so many bases and so many chairmen, then we will be given an allocation"* (Motorcycle taxi leader, Kisumu).

While associations in Kenya are comparatively weak, (c.f. Owino et al., 2024, p. 13), in Uganda and the DRC the more influential and often politicized associations serve crucial as links between politicians and riders. Association leaders are easily approachable at their offices and able to mobilize large numbers of riders for a multitude of occasions (Ehebrecht et al., 2018, p. 249). This makes them valuable targets for politicians (Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 75; Owino et al., 2024, p. 15) who also attempt to draw them to their side in order to prevent competitors from taking advantage of the association. While some associations, especially in Uganda, developed close ties with political parties, pressure from their members to remain neutral and participate in as many paid campaign activities as possible has in most cases prevented open party affiliation.

> *"Without giving them money, you're not going anywhere with the Boda-Boda"* (Politician, Nairobi).

As for other activists, (Paget, 2019, p. 3) payments are a precondition to almost all motorcyclist mobilization in Africa. To take part in political campaigns, riders temporarily abandon their transport business. To compensate for the expected loss of income, even the most diehard supporters usually expect some payments, often in the form of cash money or fuel (Titeca, 2014, p. 197). In all settings, the expected facilitation varied with the perceived wealth of the politician and the level of sympathy towards the mobilizing side. As many riders in Uganda and the eastern DRC sympathized with the financially disadvantaged opposition, lower demands levelled the playing field regarding motorcyclist mobilization. In Kenya, the sympathies of motorcyclists were geographically divided according to party strongholds. However, the pro "hustler" and Boda-Boda narrative of William Ruto gave his political coalition the edge amongst the riders across the country during the 2022 campaigns. In contrast, a lack of sympathy and trust can also prevent motorcyclist from deploying some of their potentials. Riders in eastern DRC seldom used their social networks to distribute political messages due to their general disregard for the political class and difficulties in tracking and hence paying for such activities (Müller, 2024). Generally, motorcycle taxi riders were mobilized for a wide range of different campaign activities. Thereby all three settings showed major overlaps regarding the activities they participated in, although as mentioned some regions or political sides did not use certain activities. Amongst the identified campaign activities, were rallies, advertisements, provision of transportation, information gathering and distribution, and violent action.

3.2. Rallies

Rallies are the most visible and most emphasized campaign activity that motorcyclists in Uganda, Kenya, and eastern DRC participate in. It accounts for a large part of their mobilization which is unsurprising, given the importance of rallies for campaigns across Africa (Lynch, 2023). Politicians at any level and in all countries referred to motorcyclists as essential elements of their rallies.

Figure 1 Motorcyclist spearheading an UDA rally in Nairobi 2022 (Source: Own work)

This importance is the result of their ability to deploy much of their potential during rallies and a progressive adaptation of rallies towards the inclusion of motorcycle taxi riders. In preparation for the rally, motorcyclists often roam the adjacent areas to mobilize spectators and transport them to the venue. When the politicians arrive, they are in many cases accompanied by a fleet of up to several hundred motorcycles. During this motorcade, riders perform stunts and make noise to attract bystanders and create the impression of a large support base. As the crowd assembles and the politicians hold their speeches, some riders join the spectators while others may head out to transport further supporters to the venue. Although, or maybe because, they are known to be a hired force during rallies, motorcyclists are widely seen as an important indicator of a politician's popularity, wealth, and power.

The multiple applications of motorcyclists during rallies, allow political actors to make effective use of their different potentials. By using mobility, social networks, and the availability of motorcycle taxi riders, they increase the impact of their rallies and implement new elements to an already established campaign strategy. These advantages have led to the widespread adoption of motorcycles in rallies in all three countries. Thereby, elements of the rally that profit the most from their abilities such as the motorcade have been emphasized in recent campaigns. During the observed elections, motorcyclists were mobilized for rallies on almost all political levels. The only exceptions to this were the lowest levels of government, where constituencies and budgets were seen as too small to justify their use.

3.3. Advertisement

> *"If somebody puts [on] some T-Shirt with a message and he's riding all over […] he's a moving poster. So, you get many and enclose them with your messages"* (Former presidential candidate Kizza Besigye, Kampala).

Although advertising is part of the performance of motorcycle taxi riders during rallies, it has seen widespread adaptation beyond that. During campaigns, riders with politically branded T-shirts, stickers, and posters attached to their motorbikes are a common sight in all three countries (Nyairo, 2023, p. 119). While some politicians pay the riders to advertise for them, in other cases, the distribution of branded reflective jackets or T-shirts is already seen as a form of donation. In Kenya and Uganda, riders reported owning T-shirts in the colours of any major party, which they would wear according to the occasion and their personal preferences. Frequent movements and the ability to reach even remote neighbourhoods and villages guarantee the continuous visibility of these moving billboards. Additionally, riders often engage in political talks with their customers. Thereby the social ties towards their passengers and discourses that label motorcycle taxi drivers well-informed on political topics, make them convincing advocates. This has led politicians in Kenya and Uganda to actively encourage supporters amongst motorcycle taxi riders to narrate their political agenda to their customers. However, as politicians can hardly ever validate the execution of this technique, it relies on the political convictions of the individual rider. If, like in eastern DRC the general attitude of riders towards the political class is rather negative, politicians are hesitant to pay for this form of advertisement. This illustrates how the social network potential of motorcycle taxi riders is partially untapped in some settings, while it is well used in others.

3.4. Transportation

Like advertising, transportation services are provided by motorcyclists as part of political rallies but see more widespread use beyond that. While during rallies supporters are ferried to the venue, motorcycles also transport other activists to the many meetings and campaign events across the constituencies. If a location is inaccessible by car or if the campaigning politicians do not own a car, they may occasionally also use a motorcycle themselves. In other cases, the use of a motorcycle taxi is seen as an act of fraternization with the riders and the working class in general (Goodfellow, 2015, p. 141). Additionally, the mobility of motorcycles can be used to circumvent hostile roadblocks and avoid police harassment (Crooze FM, 2020, December 4).

On election day, motorcycles in Uganda and Kenya were also observed to transport voters, to the polling stations (c.f. Bowles et al., 2020, p. 953). Sometimes these services were funded by politicians as they offer a final opportunity to convince the passengers to vote for them. While an abundance of polling stations in close proximity has rendered this service unnecessary in some areas of eastern DRC and Kenya, in parts of Uganda voters have become accustomed to the service and politicians complained that it has become a mandatory service in order to incite citizens to vote at all.

3.5. Information

Distributing and gathering information to and from the electorate is another important activity conducted by motorcycle taxi drivers during political campaigns. Although it is not as visible as the mobilization for rallies or as advertisers, it can frequently be observed during their taxi work or while transporting voters to the polling stations. In fact, information gathering was found to be important across all settings and all political levels. Due to their mobility and their far-reaching social networks, motorcycle taxi drivers are generally perceived to be well-informed about the political opinions of residents in the area they operate in. Given the lack of reliable election polls in many African countries (e.g. Koter, 2017, p. 592), especially on the sub-national level, motorcyclists are often one of the most reliable sources of such information. Other information gathered includes activities of opponents and the police which in some settings, especially in Uganda, intervened in favour of the ruling party (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 50).

Furthermore, motorcyclists are used as messengers, who can distribute information and documents across the constituency. In times of phone network shutdowns they therefore become essential to opposition parties, but also carry ballot boxes to the more remote polling stations in rural areas.

Unsurprisingly police and intelligence agencies also make use of motorcycles to disguise their operatives as taxi drivers. In repressive settings such as Uganda, they posed a constant threat to the political campaigns of opposition politicians who suffered harassment, abduction, and torture by state institutions.

3.6. Violence

> *"We are the people who are burning the tyres there" (Motorcycle taxi rider, Kisumu).*

Political violence is a common occurrence during election campaigns in Uganda Kenya and the DRC (Garbe, 2023; Trapido, 2021; Waddilove, 2019, p. 336). Unsurprisingly motorcycle taxi drivers in all three settings were regularly seen at the forefront of violent action. Mobilized as violent crowds, they attack the rallies of opponents, create roadblocks, and disturb the voting process but also use their resolve to defend campaigns against such attacks. Motorcycle taxi drivers are selected for these strategies because they already enjoy a reputation as being violent, born out of their daily conflicts with other road users. Beyond such discourses, it is their mobile and social potential that makes them effective as violent activists.

> *"They are the youth who are used again to fight the other opponents and them being able to play the role of evading, what you will call violent crowds. Because again, motorbikes are fast enough to get away" (Politician, Nairobi).*

While their mobility allows motorcycle taxi riders to strike quickly and disappear before the police can react, their solidarity provides them with the necessary cohesion. Furthermore,

the harsh working conditions on the road and frequent disputes with other road users and the police have given them plenty of experience in participating in violent protests (Sietchiping et al., 2012, p. 186). Like other mobilization techniques, violent deployment of motorcyclists in both offensive and defensive manner was equally common amongst ruling and opposition parties across the research setting. Although high risks and a general rejection of political violence prevent most riders from participating in such activities, strong political affiliations and payments that are up to ten times higher than those for other campaign activities, successfully incite a minority to take part in violent campaign strategies. Despite the continuous existence of political violence, all examined countries experienced a decline in violence during the recent campaigns. Especially in Kenya, hiring rowdy motorcyclists to obstruct opponents' campaigns has become a rare occurrence in 2022 while it was more widespread during the previous election cycle according to riders and politicians.

4. Impacts of motorcycle mobilisation

Politicians mobilize strategically (Abramson & Claggett, 2001, p. 905) and select those they see as most effective in influencing election outcomes and forwarding their political agenda (Kershaw, 2010, p. 425). Given the widespread mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers across Africa, strong impacts of their mobilization on campaigns and election results seem likely. This chapter thus examines how these impacts manifest but looks beyond the political sphere and into the local and national economic and social systems which are often interlinked.

4.1. Political

The mass mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers severely influences the conduct of campaigns and elections in Uganda, Kenya, and DR Congo. Especially in Uganda and Kenya, the ability to execute a broad variety of campaign activities has made them a dominant activist group that receives a disproportional amount of political attention and funding. Politicians reported to have spent large parts of their campaign budget on motorcyclist mobilization and repeatedly referred to them as "*the first target group when it comes to mobilization"* (Politician Soroti). The emphasis on motorcyclists has altered the way campaigns are conducted and has allegedly led to a decline in the mobilization of other groups. While new campaign strategies, such as fast-moving motorcades have become possible through the use of motorcyclists, they accelerated existing strategies, like advertising with posters and outreaches into villages and neighbourhoods. To not miss out on these advantages, most politicians in Uganda and Kenya have thus adopted the use of motorcyclists over the last decade. This development contributed to a general increase in mobility within political campaigns (see … in this volume), which is also shown by the use of helicopters (Paget, 2020, p. 23) and mobile phone technology (Manacorda & Tesei, 2018). As "*significant sums are spent on hiring, decorating and fuelling vehicles*" (Paget, 2019, p. 16),

the increase in mobility also raises the general costs of campaigning. Thus, the mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers also contributes to the rise in campaign expenditures witnessed across the continent (Paget, 2020). The slightly less widespread use of motorcyclists in campaigns in eastern DRC however also illustrates the limitations of motorcycle use and the necessity of competitive elections for the development of new campaign strategies. The relative novelty of election campaigns and a lack of security limit larger campaigns and thus motorcycle mobilization to candidates for the higher levels of government. In this, the DRC follows similar developments to Kenya and Uganda. In both countries, motorcyclist mobilization was first adopted on the national level campaigns before spreading to the lower levels of government.

While motorcycle taxi mobilization has influenced the conduct of campaigns, its effects on election results are difficult to detect. Despite the claims of many politicians that their political success was in part the result of successful motorcyclist mobilization, such claims remain hard to verify as the mobilization strategies are often mirrored by all political sides. Although the mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers is costly, the case studies could not detect large differences in their deployment between ruling and opposition parties. While the latter are often financially disadvantaged, in many instances the riders adjusted the expected compensation to the presumed resources of the mobilizing side. Additionally, they often sympathized with the opposition which further lowered their financial demands (Müller & Doevenspeck, 2023, p. 404).

4.2. Economical

Beyond political campaigns, the mobilization of the motorcycle taxi sector also influences the political economy of all researched settings. This is most visible in Uganda where the political economy of long-time President Museveni has been labelled as “Bodanomics” by observers (Daily Monitor, 2022).

Motorcycle taxis are an important economic factor in many African countries and employ millions of people. In doing so, the sector functions as an important labour reservoir for young men. The political engagement of many riders stabilizes their income and business models but also prevents the implementation of management mechanisms.

For riders participating in political campaigns, the income generated in the process can be significant and single mobilizations may equal the earnings of several days. Beyond such direct payments motorcycle taxi riders receive a variety of goods and services from political actors both in and outside the campaigning season. These include clothing, safety gear, sunshades for their operational bases, and even new motorcycles (Trapido, 2021, p. 204). Due to the seasonality of these benefits, however, riders consider them more of an occasional bonus to their income.

Although many riders profit from direct payments and gifts the general political patronage the motorcycle taxi sector receives, has a more substantial impact on their economic sustainability. Such patronage was apparent in all three countries but could manifest in

various ways. As one of the most striking examples, in Uganda, a presidential decree discouraged the taxation of motorcycle taxis (Ehebrecht et al., 2018, p. 245) while in eastern DRC the riders themselves used their political influence to limit taxation to a bearable minimum (For Lomé see: Diaz Olvera et al., 2020, p. 8). This allows the riders to maximize profits and gain an advantage over other transport providers. Furthermore, bans and regulations for motorcycle taxi operations within city centres such as in Nairobi or Kampala were either weakly enforced or ignored due to the expected political consequences (Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 74). The close connections between motorcycle taxis and politicians are further used to avoid the enforcement of safety gear and to organize the release of bikes impounded by the police (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 71).

The political participation of riders therefore helps to create an economically advantageous setting for the motorcycle taxi sector by subsidizing operations substantially through additional incomes and political patronage. This leads to an increase in rider numbers in turn strengthens their relevance as both transporters, activists, and voters. It however also means that the riders are partially dependent on paid mobilizations and consistent political patronage to maintain the status quo. This creates a mutual dependency between riders and politicians. Furthermore, the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi riders turns motorcycle ownership into an economic as well as a political asset. It is therefore not surprising, that some high-ranking politicians, like NUP president Robert Kyagulanyi, were said to own up to several thousand motorcycle taxis. While they form a steady source of income, they can also be reliably mobilized during campaigns. Such investments into motorcycle taxis might then fuel further political patronage in the future.

For these reasons, neither ruling nor opposition parties in any of the observed settings have taken up strong positions for the economic regulation of the motorcycle taxi sector. Instead, police and local authorities are tasked with managing and regulating motorcyclists. While their operations are regularly hampered by political intervention (Spooner et al., 2020, p. 71) they face the grudge of the riders by issuing fines and impounding bikes.

4.3. Social

The impacts of motorcyclist mobilization on the political and economic settings in Uganda Kenya and the DRC extend further into the social systems of the countries. The politically supported growth of the motorcycle taxi sector has made it a labour reservoir for the notoriously unruly group of socially disenfranchised young men (Oldenburg, 2019). Thus, fears of unemployment and social unrest also prevent the regulation of the sector. *“We would say, that in Mbarara municipality we want only 1000 Boda-Bodas. But where do you put the 9000 people” (Municipality Official Mbarara).*
Furthermore, the situation has increased tendencies in which young mobile activists have become the preferred targets of political mobilization.
“We want them to be part of us. We want to recruit them. We want their associations to influence them because we think they are very important in our society.” (Patrick Amuriat FDC President, Kampala). While this comes at the expense of traditional activist groups, such

as market vendors or women's groups, it also puts youth and not the traditionally important elders at the centre of political attention.

In Uganda, where the authoritarian regime of President Museveni is slowly withdrawing the political liberties it introduced in the early 2000s, motorcycle taxis now also function as important spaces for free political speech. Politicised by their frequent mobilization riders engage in political talks with their customers. The constant movements, loud noises, and the inability of drivers and passengers to face each other thereby create an environment that makes it almost impossible for outsiders to listen to these conversations or record them. This makes motorcycle taxis important transmitters of news and opinion beyond the state-controlled media realm.

However, the politically protected absence of safety regulation has also contributed to the high numbers of accidents involving motorcycles across all three countries experience (Ntramah et al., 2023). Motorcycle accidents are seen as the prime source of traffic injuries and several scientific publications have addressed the issue (Doherty, 2017; Siya et al., 2019; Wanume et al., 2019). Sometimes hospital wards for traffic accident victims were even referred to as "Boda-Boda" wards and citizens frequently mentioned their fear of being hit by a motorcycle not following traffic rules.

In all settings, riders also attempt to resist any form of registration whenever possible, as they fear it would lead to regulation and taxation. Often politicians give in to these demands due to political considerations. A lack of registration allows some riders to conduct criminal activities and also enables other criminals to intermingle with the workforce (Muwanga et al., 2023, p. 75). Consequently, motorcycles are frequently used for theft, robbery, and murder in all three countries. This in turn reinforces the reputation of motorcyclists as violent and dangerous.

While the spread of motorcycle taxi services and laissez-faire politics towards the sector still find widespread support amongst the population in Kenya Uganda and the DRC, politicians and citizens alike increasingly experience the effects of their unregulated presence. Any effective management is however complicated by the political mobilization of motorcycle taxi riders. Comparing these countries with close by Rwanda illustrates how this exceptional status is linked to the ongoing demand for their engagement in ground campaigns. In Rwanda, where political opposition has hardly any presence in the political sphere and elections are not competitive, the demand for motorcycle activists during campaigns is limited. This has greatly contributed to the ability of the state to organize and regulate the sector effectively, by enforcing traffic regulations, safety gear, and unionization (Ntramah et al., 2023, p. 11; Owino et al., 2024, p. 13).

5. Conclusion

"*No candidate has ever gone to parliament, even at this local level, without using the Boda-Bodas*" (Politician Soroti)

Motorcycle taxi drivers, under their various local denominations, have become important activists during ground campaigns across Africa. This parallel development is no coincidence, however. Motorcycle taxi drivers are highly mobility and possess large social capital. They are also open to spontaneous recruitment as activists and transporters. These potentials, rooted in the riders' access to motorcycle-powered individual mobility, enable them to execute diverse campaign strategies. In the wake of growing demands for mobility within ground campaigns in Africa, motorcyclists thus propel campaigns and may replace other activist groups in the process.

During campaigning season motorcyclists are most prominently deployed alongside political rallies. There they act as hired mobile supporters for the motorcade and the rally itself, but can also transport spectators and advertise the event. Advertising and transportation are also used separately as distinct campaign activities. While mobile advertising is mostly done via branded clothing, stickers, and posters, transport includes the provision of mobility to other campaign activists but also the transport of voters to and from the polling stations. On those occasions, but also during the daily taxi work, motorcyclists may advertise further by discussing politics with their passengers. In the process, they distribute and gather valuable information which is then relayed back to the mobilizers. Beyond that, motorcyclists are recruited as a violent pressure group. Deployed to obstruct rallies, intimidate voters, ransack polling stations, or create roadblocks motorcyclists can create significant damage and use their mobility to escape before opponents or security forces can respond.

Due to these diverse abilities, motorcyclists have become important activists across the political spectrum and influence the conduct of campaigns in Uganda, Kenya, and the DRC. This importance extends beyond campaigns and affects the economic and social systems of the countries. Politically, the use of hired motorcyclists contributes to the ongoing mobilization and monetarization of political campaigns in Africa and emphasizes mobile activists at the expense of other activist groups. Their engagement also results in an increased politicization of the transport sector and transport worker unions. However, due to the equal use of motorcyclists in the campaigns of all political sides possible impacts on election results remain hard to detect.

The equal dependence of all politicians on motorcycle activists has resulted in far-ranging political patronage for the motorcycle taxi sector. Afraid of losing support, politicians protect motorcycle taxi riders from taxation as well as regulation and prevent the enforcement of safety measures. While this further strengthens their economic position in comparison to other transporters and secures their income, it also increases traffic accidents and eases the criminal use of motorcycles. The mobilization of motorcyclists thus also affects the social spheres of African states in multiple ways. As the number of motorcycle taxi drivers is still on the rise, the profession has become an important labour reservoir for notoriously unruly but

now politically empowered youth. Their unique liberties also lay the foundation for their role as platforms for free political speech in authoritarian Uganda.

Given the close ties between politicians and motorcycle taxi drivers in African countries and the increase in both mobility demands and the number of riders, it is safe to say, that these flexible transporters are going to remain a political force in the foreseeable future.

However, their position as Swiss army knives on wheels is not unconditional. In order to be mobilized a country has to engage in competitive elections, that emphasize mobile ground campaigns. In full autocracies, their political need is likely diminished significantly. Likewise, a shift towards more digitalized campaigns could endanger the continuation of their mobilization. Finally, overwhelming public pressure against the negative externalities of an unsanctioned motorcycle taxi sector could eventually overpower political patronage and lead to the enforcement of restrictions. This could turn the tide against an ever-increasing presence of motorcyclists in ground campaigns in Africa.

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Better together? The role of professional associations in establishing motorcycle taxi riding as a socially accepted occupation in eastern DRC

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Abstract:

This article discusses the role of professional motorcycle taxi driver associations in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in gaining social recognition for their members. Motorcycle taxi drivers, colloquially called 'Motards', originate from diverse backgrounds ranging from former militants to university graduates. Their profession however is widely perceived as a temporary job or even a "dead end" and motards are described as lawless and violent. The paper uses empirical data to analyse the activities of professional associations, which are frequently mentioned as important for organising informal transport. It finds that the examined associations differ greatly in size and services. While some are little more than registrars and provide limited assistance to their members, others have established social security schemes or offer professional training. Although these associations engage their members in long-term projects that aim at making it a socially accepted profession, the division, and politicisation of associations prevents large-scale improvements.

Keywords: Informal Transport, Motorcycle Taxi, Congo, Africa, Unions,

Introduction

In the fast-growing cities of Africa, public transportation is highly contested (Sietchiping et al 2012, 183). Urban authorities frequently lack the ability to organise and regulate public transport and informal public transporters have filled the gaps by deploying (mini)-buses, motorcycles, or bicycles. The existence of informal transporters is thereby inherently conflictual (Agbiboa 2018, 16; Durant et al 2023, 3) and transport authorities consider them a nuisance because they take up public space without being properly regulated or taxed. Despite this, informal transporters are also praised by some observers for their flexibility, ingenuity, and low fares. While millions of people use their services every day, public opinion on informal transport workers remains mixed (e.g. Hagen et al 2016, 101). Important reasons for this are high accident rates and fears of falling victim to crime (Cervero and Golub 2007, 446). Informal transport is also seen as a source of traffic jams and congestion within cities (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2020, 1). Because of this mixed reputation, informal transporters are sometimes referred to as a "necessary evil" (NGO worker Goma (20821SZGo)).

This is also true for informal motorcycle taxis. 'The relationship between moto-taxi entrepreneurs/operators and the public can be quite contradictory – at times mutually beneficial and at others conflictual' (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 249). Motorcycle taxis are amongst the most flexible and most available forms of individual public transport in many parts of Africa. At the same time, they are frequently described as reckless criminals who can use violence to pursue their economic and political interests (c.f. Diaz Olvera et al 2016, 166; Goodfellow 2015, 135; Owino et al 2024, 13). Publications propose different approaches to address the negative aspects of informal public transport. While some advocate for different degrees of formalisation and state control (Heinrichs et al 2017, 4515; Tun et al 2020) others consider self-regulation through unions and stakeholder associations as the most promising strategy (Ezeibe et al 2017, 268; Roca and Simabuko 2020, 383). However, 'the extent to which these organisations actually manage to represent their members' interests […] is unclear from the available literature' (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 249).

This article addresses the gap by examining the influence of worker associations on the public perception of motorcycle taxi drivers in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. This is relevant because the public image and social acceptance of a profession directly affect the willingness of workers to remain in their profession, establish professional work ethics, and structure the informal transport sector. The article analyses the measures that associations take to improve the public image of their members and reviews their success. Thus, the article aims to broaden the existing knowledge of the abilities and limitations of the self-regulating bodies of informal transport workers. To do so, it uses empirical data collected in the years 2020 and 2021 in eastern DRC to contribute to a debate that oscillates between calls for formalisation and confidence in the self-regulating forces of the sector.

Informal transporters: Shortcut, Stopgap and Livelihood

Like most motorcycle taxi drivers, those in the Democratic Republic of Congo operate largely informally. Thereby informal public transport is usually defined as being publically accessible but at most partially regulated and often untaxed (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 446). It is often associated with areas in which authorities are unable or unwilling to exert full regulatory

control over the public transport sector (Cervero and Golub 2007, 446; Daniel et al 2023, 274) and fail to provide sanctioned alternatives (Owino et al 2024, 3). Benefits of informal transport are flexible routing and pricing and a fast adaptation to new conditions and demands. For the transporters, informality can reduce operating costs as they might avoid taxes and other, potentially expensive, regulations. A lack of registration also allows new workers to join the informal transport sector easily. For motorcycle taxi drivers this is further accelerated by the low prices for motorcycles and the ability to lease bikes (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 246). In several African countries, the lack of regulations and low entrance barriers have also made the informal transport sector an important labour reservoir (c.f. Guillen et al 2013, 31; Heinze 2019, 4). Working in the informal transport sector frequently includes unhealthy and physically straining working conditions (Bocarejo and Urrego 2022, 2; Ntramah et al 2023, 4) and many workers are young men from the lower levels of the social hierarchy (Ehebrecht and Lenz 2019, 6; Owino et al 2024, 16; Sietchiping et al 2012, 186).

Informal transport workers are frequently perceived as violent, dangerous, and social outcasts (Agbiboa 2019, 2; c.f. Ehebrecht et al 2018, 249). The reasons for this a manifold. A lack of regulation allows transporters to operate without driving licenses or safety gear and on un-serviced vehicles (Ntramah et al 2023, 3). This in turn causes accidents and conflicts with other road users (Cervero and Golub 2007, 445). Limited state control further allows criminals to intermingle with transporter workers to commit crimes under the disguise of providing transportation (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 248). Precarious and unplanned working environments worsen this situation and lead to, sometimes violent, competition among informal transporters (Ehebrecht and Lenz 2019, 8). Additionally, the prolific recruitment of informal transport workers for political campaigns and confrontations (Müller and Doevenspeck 2023; Paget 2020, 22; Sopranzetti 2014) supports narratives that depict informal transport workers as politicised unruly, and violent (Agbiboa 2019, 1). In combination with the often-poor social backgrounds of both the workers (Ehebrecht and Lenz 2019, 6) and their customers (Bocarejo and Urrego 2022, 2), these factors negatively influence the perception of informal transporters as non-professionals who are not working a “proper job” but remain in waiting for better job opportunities (Oldenburg 2019). The negative perception in turn influences the livelihood of informal transport workers. Although some informal transporters can earn an above-average income (Ntramah et al 2023, 2), their work is often not considered an “adult job”. Bus drivers, motorcyclists, and touts regularly face difficulties when, applying for state support or seeking social recognition e.g. through elections or marriage (Öbom 2020, 5). This causes them to seek employment outside the sector if they can do so and increases the fluctuation of the workforce (c.f. Mallett et al 2022, 16).

To gain public recognition for their profession many transport workers have created professional associations. These provide a link between informal individual workers and state institutions and can establish internal regulative structures and examples for good professional conduct (Ezeibe et al 2017, 254; Heinze 2019; Mukwaya et al 2022). Their impact however remains obscure in many cases (Ehebrecht et al 2018, 249).

Fieldwork and Data

The data for this article was collected in the provinces of North and South Kivu of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2020 and 2021. The data collection spanned over two research stays with a total of four months and was part of a broader research project on the politics of the motorcycle taxi sector in eastern DRC (c.f. Müller 2024). In the process, the ambiguous reputation of motards and the role of their professional associations became frequently addressed topics. This led to an increased focus on the roles, services, and limitations of professional motorcycle associations.

The research used semi-structured interviews as a primary way of data collection. This was supported by observations and ride-alongs on motorcycle taxis in Goma and Bukavu (Büscher et al 2011, 105). In total 55 interviews were conducted. Target groups included motorcycle taxi drivers (motards), motorcycle association leaders and administrators, politicians involved in the mobilisation or management of the moto-taxi sector as well as journalists and representatives of NGOs working with motards.

Due to armed conflict in both provinces, the data collection was concentrated in the provincial capitals of Bukavu and Goma. These two cities also contained the highest number of motards as well as the largest diversity of motorcycle taxi rider associations. They are also political and administrative centres of the Kivu region.

Motards: Profession and Reputation

Motorcycle taxis in the Kivu region emerged in the 1990s (Oldenburg 2019, 65) in reaction to the availability of cheap Asian-made motorcycles. Due to 30 years of armed conflict, most roads in Congo's eastern provinces are un-tarmacked and un-serviced. This made motorcycles indispensable for accessing towns and villages while in the provincial capitals, they became the only way to bypass the frequent traffic jams. The influx of motorcycles which cost around 1000-1500 USD (Verweijen 2015, 163) has made investments in the sector attractive for entrepreneurs, companies, and armed groups (c.f. Heinze 2019, 5; Verweijen 2015). The high number of displaced and demobilised thereby serves as a labour reservoir for the profession. However, 'they are not only people who are coming from a non-privileged society. [Some] are coming from poverty […]. But others have a degree […] but they did not find a job.' (Politician Bukavu (8821CABu)).

The favourable conditions led to a steady increase in the number of motards over the last years and in 2021 around 40.000 motards operated in South Kivu, while approximately 20.000 motards were active in Goma and Bukavu respectively (c.f. also Oldenburg 2018, 261). Motorcycle taxi driving has particularly low entrance barriers because formal requirements such as driving licences, registration and safety gear are weakly enforced. At the same time, motards can earn relatively high monthly incomes of up to 500 USD per month according to some riders and observers. Although most riders earn much less, their income exceeds that of many other professions and the research found several people leaving their jobs as teachers, traders or shopkeepers in favour of becoming a motard. Other motards interviewed included university students and graduates who saw motorcycle taxi riding as either the best or the only opportunity to earn a living. Many riders are however school dropouts, displaced people or demobilised militants (Oldenburg 2018, 260). This melange of social and economic backgrounds has resulted in diverging perceptions of

motards amongst the population. By many, motards are perceived as poor and violent outlaws who remain close to their alleged background as former combatants (Oldenburg 2019, 73).

> '[…] you would call them a low class of the society. You would consider them as hooligans and gangs and so on. […] Many of them come from the armed groups' (Politician Bukavu (6921EHBu)).

Others however acknowledge them as courageous entrepreneurs who took up the profession in reaction to a lack of alternative employment and have become important social and political activists.

'It was a job for the poor at the beginning. After that […] they began intervening themselves on some social matters that count, like political participation and human rights. […]. It changed the public image of motards. They were considered as courageous people. As people who can do what society is unable to do (Politician, Bukavu (10921AMBu)).

Regardless of their background, being a motard is overwhelmingly considered a necessity rather than a choice. At the same time, despite some praises of their courage and ingenuity, the profession is mostly perceived negatively (Oldenburg 2019, 73). Motards were referred to as hooligans, swindlers, drunkards and thieves amongst other things during the research and many considered them social outcasts, even if they held academic or professional degrees. There are serval reasons for this. Due to the poor conditions of the roads and many motorcycles severe accidents are common. This puts motards in conflict with other road users for the right of passage or compensation in case of accidents. As police and courts in the DRC are considered unreliable, riders often collectively coerce compensation from alleged perpetrators or escape quickly in order to avoid persecution. Such tactics are mirrored by criminals who use the same motorcycles and easily intermingle with motards when committing crimes e.g. robbery, theft or murder. Thereby the lack of identification makes it difficult to differentiate between motards and criminals and it remains uncertain if and to what degree the two groups overlap. Because motards offer their labour for hire, they are also receptacles to political mobilisation (Müller 2024; Oldenburg 2018). The political involvement of motards frequently results in clashes with security forces and opposing political sides (Verweijen 2015, 202). This puts the riders on display during political violence and further supports their reputation as 'rowdy youth'. Being depicted as 'youthful' is another reason for their doubtful reputation. In the eastern Congolese context, in which the youth extends to up to 35 years (Oldenburg 2019, 71) young men are seen as less responsible, more violent and prone to take risks (c.f. Verweijen 2015, 198). This reputation appears to be extended to older motards, who are sometimes seen as eternal youth who cannot reach adulthood due to their profession (c.f. Oldenburg 2019). This prompts many motards to look for employment outside the motorcycle taxi sector, which in turn creates larger turnovers of the workforce and prevents the establishment of professional experience and work ethics.

To address the downsides of the negative reputation of motorcycle taxis and organise the sector, authorities, NGOs and the riders themselves have welcomed and promoted the unionisation and registration of motards into professional associations.

Motorcycle associations in eastern DRC

Most motorcycle taxi drivers in eastern DRC are organised within professional unions or associations. The unionisation of transport workers has a long tradition in the DRC and dates back to colonial times (Heinze 2019, 6). Until 2007 motards in the Kivu provinces were united within a major association called 'Acco-Moto' (Oldenburg 2018, 261) that also served bus drivers, touts and conductors. Due to the steady increase of motorcycle taxis, motards began to outnumber the other transport workers. The desire to have their particular interest represented consequently led to the emergence of specialised motorcycle taxi associations. Today these coexist alongside more inclusive transport workers associations. Recently, however, the fragmentation of associations appears to have accelerated due to political and economic interests as well as regional devolution (Oldenburg 2018, 261). During the research in 2020 and 2021, more than 18 different motorcycle taxi organisations were identified in Goma and Bukavu.

Association	Full name	Founded	Members approx.	Operate in	Services identified	Membership
APROMOTESKI	Association de Promoteurs de Taxi-Moto au Sud-Kivu	"Old"	3550	Bukavu	Registration, Sickness/Death	Motards
MUPD	L'Association des Motards Unis pour la Paix et le Développement	2019	75	Bukavu	Tranings, Economic alternatives, Sacco, Social security	Motards, Family members
SYPROTAC	Syndicat Professionnel des Taximen du Congo	2011	5000	Goma	Registration, Police	Motards
ASNAMOC	L'Association Nationale de Motards du Congo	2010	8000	Goma/Bukavu	Registration, Police, Sacco	Motards
COTAM	Coordination de Taximen Moto	2007	8000	Goma	Registration, Police, Sickness, Projects	Motards
ATAMOV	l'Association des Taximen Moto et Voitures	1991	2000	Goma	Registration, Police, Moto lease, Trainings	Motards, Car-Taxi
APROMOTCO	Association des Propriétaires et Motocyclistes Transporteurs du Congo	2001	3500	Goma/Bukavu	Registration, Police	Motards, Owners, Tuk-Tuks
COPTAM	Collectif des Propriétaires et Taximen Moto	2010	8000	Goma	Registration, Sacco, Sickness/death,	Motards, Owners
ASONAMOC	Association pour la Solidarité Nationale des Motocyclistes du Congo	2019	18.500	Bukavu/Goma	Registration, Trainings, Sickness	Motards
ATAMOC	Association des Taximen Moto du Congo (?)	2017		Goma	Registration, Police	Motards
AMOCYCO				Bukavu		Moards
ATTKA				Bukavu		Motards
TRACTED	Tricycliste en Action pour 'lentraide et developpement			Bukavu	Registration, Trainings, Social Acivities	Tuk-Tuks
ASONAMO				Bukavu		Motards
APROMOTRIVE				Bukavu		Motards
COTAMISK	Collecif du Taximen Moto ... au Sud-Kivu (?)			Bukavu		Motards
AMUSCO				Bukavu	Registration, Advice	Motards
MUDEI				Goma		Motards

Figure 1 List of Moto associations identified during the research (Source: Own work).

This list of associations identified during the research is not conclusive and only provides a first overview of moto associations in the Kivu provinces. While some associations are highly localised, others are present across a province or like ASONAMOC have ambitions for nationwide representation of motorcyclists. The frequent emergence of new associations and the disappearance of others further complicates an exact count. Additionally, smaller

and newer associations like MUPD with less than 100 members might easily be overlooked. Furthermore, the associations practice different membership policies. While some are limited to motards, others also welcome motorcycle owners, other transport workers or family members of motards.

The individual histories of associations also resulted in a broad diversity of services offered by the different associations. All associations provide professional registration as a basic service. Being an association member is legally required for motards and is comparatively strictly enforced by the state and the associations. Thus, a lack of registration was named among the most important reasons for fines and arrests by traffic police officers. Protection from police harassment was, unsurprisingly, the second most common service of associations. This involved direct contact with the police that could be used to lower fines and negotiate the release of arrested riders and impounded motorcycles.

Another frequent service of associations was financial support to members who were either sick or injured or had pregnant spouses. This often extends to close relatives in cases where a motard has died. Most associations would thereby assist the rider or his family by covering hospital or burial fees. Sometimes the money for healthcare services can be drawn from specifically created savings and credit cooperatives (sacco) within the association. The high demand for healthcare support amongst riders has led some larger associations like ATAMOV to consider establishing a specialised hospital for motards.

'When a rider gets an accident and is hurt, they are always available for supporting him and helping him and if the motard is coming from a poor background they can make a great and significant support' (Motard Bukavu (12921XXBu)).

Associations also offered different kinds of training. MUPD trained their members to carry out different economic activities like crafts and farming, while bigger associations tended to focus on motard-specific activities, such as road safety training.

Large associations also interacted directly with local government institutions. This was especially relevant regarding taxation, as associations are used to collect the taxes from the riders. Hence, they wielded considerable negotiation power towards the height of the taxes and used it to keep taxation to a bearable minimum.

'[The association] can help you to be well protected on the road. Because the associations are also a protection against tax and authorities' (Motard Bukavu (12921CMBu)).

The reliance on associations for revenue collection illustrates why associations are referred to as the only effective regulative force within the motorcycle taxi sector. Their regulative aspirations are also reflected in the attempts of some associations to enforce mandatory association membership amongst riders. To do so, they deploy so-called inspectors and controllers. These association agents operate at crucial crossroads where they stop motards to verify their membership. According to riders, this practice experiences frequent abuse. Allegedly, inspectors not only harass riders without registration but also those they see as being registered in the wrong, i.e. not their own, association.

'Because the controllers always annoy motards and take money from them. So if there is one of our members who is arrested by the controllers of other associations, we tell the association

that they don't have the right to arrest a motard from our association' (Association Secretary Goma (31821EXGo)).

Such conflict was especially widespread amongst riders of COTAM and its breakaway fraction COPTAM in Goma. As a result, another "service" valued by motards in their association was the ability to protect them from the inspectors of rival associations.

The examined motorcycle taxi associations are diverse in regard to sizes and services. However, contradicting Van Acker et al. (2021, p. 5), who saw social services as the main reason for joining an association; few motards mentioned it as relevant to their membership during the research. A reason for this is the uneven integration of individual riders into their association. While some riders do not pay the most rudimentary membership fees of their associations, some do not use their services, while others are not aware of them. Some motards however make regular use of training programs or have received financial aid from their association.

Despite their diversity, associations can have an influence on the perception of the motorcycle sector. Association leaders often publicly represent the whole sector and associations are generally attributed a large degree of control over the motards. The research found four ways in which associations positively affect the public perception of the sector but also just as many aspects that negatively impact the general reputation of motards.

Amongst the factors that improve the reputation of motards are the efforts of associations to regulate and represent the sector, the services they provide to their members as well as their role in providing a link between the motards and governmental and nongovernmental organisations. These positive impacts are contrasted by four characteristics that negatively affect the perception of motards. These were their fragmentation, infighting, politicisation and lack of institutional power.

Positive impacts

'There are some things that the government is not able to do with motards. They cannot convince them, but we can' (Association Secretary, Goma (25821RKGo)).

Arguably, the most acknowledged achievement of motorcycle associations is their ability to organise and regulate the sector. Just as in other countries, informal transport in the DRC possesses the tendency to remain volatile and difficult to sanction or tax (c.f. Ehebrecht 2020, 100; Roca and Simabuko 2020, 376). Therefore, the regulating forces of transport unions are seen as a way to control the motards. This task gains additional importance against the background of motards being perceived as violent and infiltrated by criminals but also the inability of state institutions in North and South Kivu to carry out these duties. To do so, associations register transport workers and provide them with identification in the form of number plates, IDs, licences and branded jackets.

'There are activities we do with the government. For example, the activity of selling number plates and driving licences. We help the government by selling those statements in order to ease the work of the government' (Association Leader, Goma (27821KKLGo)).

Registration is a crucial precondition for the management of the motorcycle sector and a socially recognised activity of associations. In addition, associations also carry out the task of enforcing the mandatory membership policies by deploying controllers or inspectors to check the validity of membership IDs amongst the riders.

Some associations also advocate for the good conduct of their members by providing safety training. Such trainings illustrate how associations seek to improve the public image of their members and facilitate the reintegration of former combatants (van Acker et al 2021, 4). Other services such as the payment of hospital bills and training on other income-generating activities improve the livelihood of the motards. Through them, associations also improve the overall reputation of motorcycle taxi riding as a proper occupation and provide motards with a sense of professionalism.

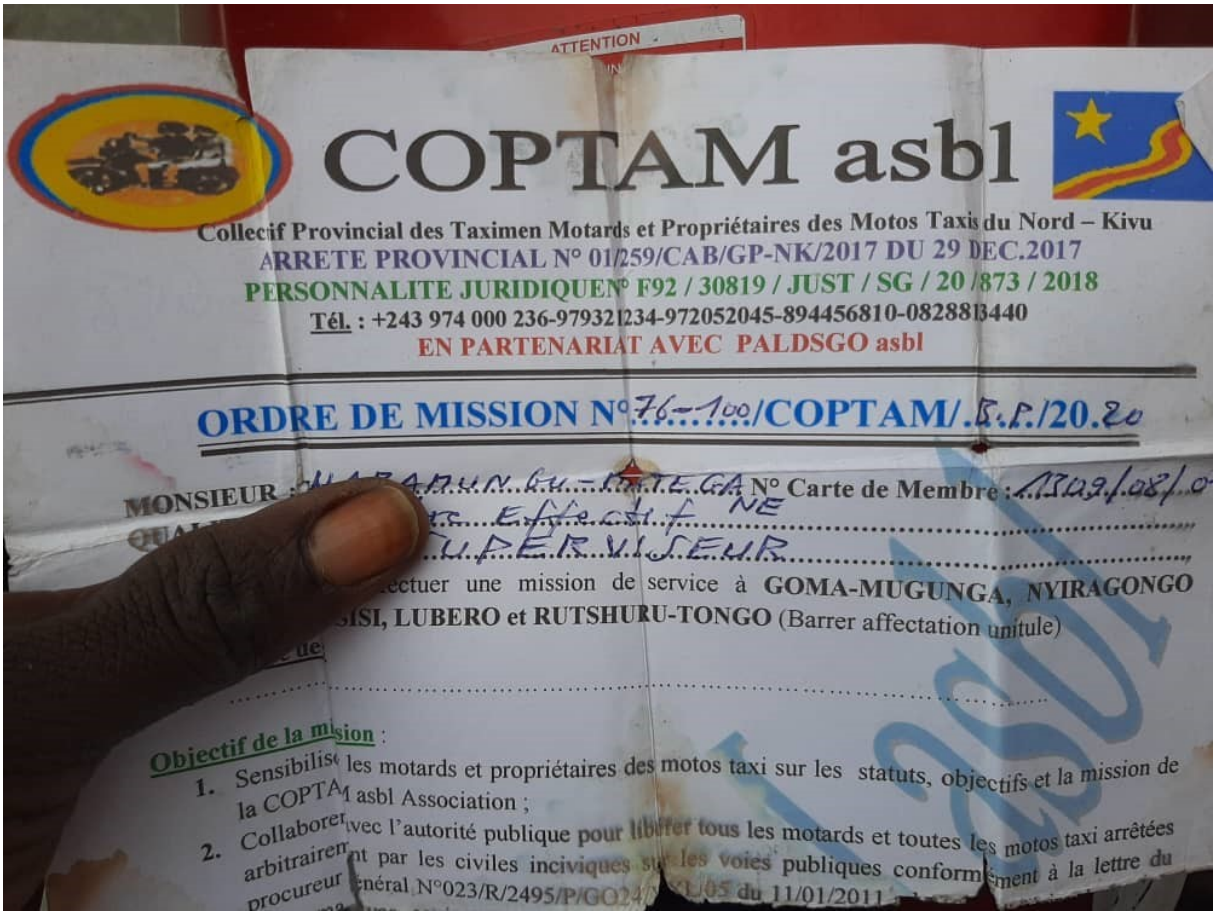

Figure 1 "Objectif de Mission" COPTAM association Goma (Source: Own work).

The aspiration to implement professional ethics for the motorcycle taxi sector is also among the central narratives within the public communication strategy of all associations. Especially large associations frequently represent their members and motards in general towards the government, the media, NGOs and the public (juardc.info 2023; Kis24 info 2021; Radio Okapi 2022). Although each association represents only a fraction of the motards this role should not be underestimated. Despite structural differences, the proclaimed goals of most associations to improve the services and livelihood of motards are relatively congruent. This allows them to often speak with one voice when addressing the media or negotiating with the state. The existence of professional associations also eases the involvement of

motorcycle taxi drivers in state and NGO schemes. Such schemes can aim at improving the working and living conditions of the riders or the general public. This affects the reputation of motards e.g. by making them advocates for disease prevention or demobilisation while associations become visible as (co-)organisers of these projects. Beyond the impacts of projects, the role of associations as gateways for development projects positively influences their credibility and public perception.

Negative impacts

While professional motorcycle taxi associations can have positive impacts on the public perceptions of motards, their reception is not entirely positive. The fragmentation of associations, infighting and politicisation but also their lack of institutional capacity reflect negatively on the public perception of the sector.

The institutional fragmentation of the motorcycle taxi sector and the volatile nature of professional moto associations is thereby at the centre of most criticism. In the eyes of the public, it reproduces images of an unregulated transport sector in which smaller associations, built around political and ethnic or economic interests pursue the particular interest of their leaders.

'The reason for having a lot of associations is that everyone wants to become president. […] And there is some relationship, but conflicts remain there, once everyone wants to control the other, saying I am the biggest, I have a lot of members, I am the oldest, or we have a lot of… And these are the small conflicts that are there between associations' (Motard Goma (18821TJGo)).

These conflicts work against attempts of association leaders to depict their organisations as a unifying and regulative force amongst informal transporters. The fragmentation of their associations also weakens the public voice of the motards and makes the enforcement of regulation and registration more difficult. The diverging approaches of the different associations towards training and services for their members also make their impacts on the work ethics and wellbeing of motards quite uneven.

Infighting is one of the reasons for the fragmentation of moto association in the Kivu provinces. Dissatisfaction with the association leadership caused riders in Goma to break away from COTAM and form COPTAM in 2010. While both associations now rank among the largest associations in Goma, their controllers harass the members of the rival associations for their alleged lack of registration. Such competition strengthens discourses already depicting the moto sector as disorganised violent and unruly. However, while in other contexts transport worker unions are considered to be involved in violent crime (c.f. Ezeibe et al., 2017, p. 259), during the research, motorcycle associations did not face similar accusations. However, they are sometimes seen as unable to prevent the unlawful behaviour of their members.

Some of the associations in eastern DRC are closely linked to political actors and thus facilitate the participation of motards in political unrest and protests (c.f. Kis24 info, 2021). Beyond direct affiliations, motards are important political activists in North and South Kivu and are often contracted by different politicians through their associations (Müller 2024).

While the processes of mobilisation and the interactions between politicians and associations are rarely visible, the results strongly affect the reputation of the motards as the Congolese public mostly disapproves of the politicisation of motards. An important reason for this is the frequent participation of motorcyclists in violent protests and political turmoil. Especially their hired support for unpopular politicians, such as Emmanuel Shadary in 2018, has a bad influence on the general perception of motards.

Ultimately, the fragmentation of the various moto associations also weakens their institutional performance such as their ability to deliver services to their members and to represent the sector as a whole.

'Associations were supposed to create social services for their members. Maybe schools, hospitals, and so on. To help their members to have a better life. But for the moment they did not reach that goal because they don't have the support' (Motard Goma (11821SLGo)).

As the number of associations has increased drastically over the last decade (c.f. Oldenburg 2018) they can be assumed to have lost institutional some capacity. New associations lack the personal, institutional and martial resources of established ones and struggle to set up offices, regulate their members, develop support schemes and establish networks amongst political actors and NGOs in the region. Associations also now serve and represent fewer members, which prevents economies of scale and divides membership fees. This results in the inability of associations to address critical challenges faced by the motards, such as bad roads, harassment by the police, accidents and crime. While these issues would be difficult to address even for well-organised associations their institutional weakness makes substantial improvements almost impossible. This in turn weakens the identification of motards with their associations and the perceived impact of associations on the sector in general.

Conclusion & Discussion

This article examined the impact of professional associations on the perception of motorcycle taxi riding as a profession in eastern DRC. These informal transporters in the Kivu provinces possess a doubtful public reputation. They are seen as dangerous, violent, politically unruly and generally working in a profession that is not considered a proper job but a temporary stopgap.

Professional associations attempt to address these problems. Despite the challenging political and infrastructural setting they operate in, they have become key players in attempts to organise the sector. They largely facilitate the management of the motorcycle taxi sector and function as a link between, riders, state institutions, NGOs and the public. As a core duty, they conduct the mandatory registration for all motorcycle taxi riders. Additionally, they provide social security mechanisms that cater for sick members or the families of deceased riders. Their registration efforts address allegations of chaos within the sector and make it more difficult for criminals to intermingle with the registered riders. Additionally, associations embed the riders into state policy while making NGO programs available to them. This could potentially reduce the number of violent protests of motards,

as they are able to express their opinion via their associations. Thus, the actions of the motorcycle associations contain many important features for professionalising the sector. Furthermore, they have the potential to improve the perception of motards amongst the public and other state and non-state actors.

Currently, however, several challenges prevent moto associations from unfolding their full potential to make motorcycle taxi driving a socially accepted profession. A key problem is their fragmentation. The increasing number of associations leaves each fraction to represent a smaller percentage of the overall workforce. Fragmentation and competition also cause infighting and reduce the ability of individual associations to represent motards in general. Furthermore, the existing associations differ greatly in their leverage on their riders and the services they provide. This creates loopholes for unregistered and criminal motorcyclists but also excludes riders from the social services of associations. The reasons for the ongoing fragmentation are the diverging political and economic interests of association leaders, riders and external political actors. The existing associations compete for political economic and institutional support and deploy their members into political struggles. The widespread negative reception of the political class and their often violent competition is thus reflected onto the motards. An additional challenge for associations is their limited public visibility. Few riders wear insignia of their membership and many do not identify with the association they are registered in. This lowers the impact of the activities conducted by associations and further reduces their ability to become linked to improvements within the moto sector.

Finally, the work of motorcycle associations has to be reviewed against the backdrop of the political and social setting they operate in. Although their achievements are not always recognised, they established baseline services as well as some professional standards and work ethics. The modest achievements of the associations might not meet the expectations of the Congolese public and the motards themselves but are still noteworthy given the weakness of Congolese political institutions and their own challenges.

But what can be done to improve the situation? Some riders and observers suggested the reunification of all associations. Such an approach is however thwarted by the deep-rooted divisions between the associations and the weakness of the provincial regulatory bodies. The competition for riders, who seek to avoid regulations and membership fees, also reduces the rigour of some associations to enforce regulations. In places where the unification of informal transport associations was attempted, such as Nairobi, Kampala or Kigali, the results remained mixed. In Nairobi, political parties and criminal networks were able to gain control over the unified association (Heinze 2019) while in Kampala the proposed association had to be dissolved after allegations of involvement in theft, and murder (Goodfellow and Mukwaya 2021, 30). In Kigali, where the conduct and reputation of motards have significantly improved, the development followed a general strengthening of state institutions in the 2000s (Goodfellow 2015). While associations thus provide the baseline for the regulation of informal transporters and the improvement of their public image, they are currently unable to have a significant impact on how the Congolese public perceives motards. Despite the rising numbers of riders and associations being a motorcycle taxi rider remains connected to images of immaturity, crime and a life “in waiting” for better employment.

Data Availability Statement:

Data is available on request from the author. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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